



THE UPLAND GAZETTE

North Carolina Small Game Notes

Spring 1998

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Habitat Loss Leads to Downward Spiral of Woodcock Populations

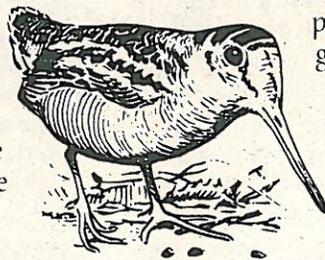
A tiny bird climbed high into the starry sky only to return to earth in wide circles. The bird repeatedly performed the dazzling display of high flying acrobatics and "downward spiraling" circles accompanied by a whistling sound coming from its wings. I was fortunate to observe this remarkable display last January on a Piedmont game land owned by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. The American woodcock, observed displaying for a potential mate, is one of the most widespread but least understood gamebirds in North America. Found from southern Canada to Texas and Florida, it goes by many names throughout the United States. "Timberdoodle," "snipe," "hill partridge," "bog borer," and "bog sucker" are just a few. Most North Carolinians encounter the woodcock with their quail or grouse dog and often refer to it mistakenly as "snipe."

Weighing less than a half pound and sporting a long bill and bug-like eyes, the American woodcock is the subject of much misunderstanding, mystery and myth. Early settlers, the same ones who gave it all those local names, believed the female woodcock carried her young between her thighs as she flew between roosting and feeding sites. This belief has since been proven untrue. We still do not have a complete understanding of the extent of breeding in North Carolina, nor do we know what happens to

the females and young that breed in the Southeast, only to disappear during the summer. Many wildlife biologists speculate that the females and young migrate north in late spring or early summer. If true, this would be an unusual

twist to our common perception of migratory behavior.

Woodcock plumage is a combination of mottled brown, black and buff that camouflages the



bird perfectly in its preferred forest habitat. Hunters sometimes mistakenly shoot the forest-dwelling woodcock, believing it to be the common snipe (the real snipe) which prefers open areas of mud in marshes and wetlands. Because of declining populations in the Eastern United States, woodcock season has been reduced to approximately one month while snipe season is 3½ months. Unknowing quail and grouse hunters may break the law by shooting a woodcock out of season while believing they are hunting snipe. Many also do not realize that it is illegal to hunt either migratory species with an unplugged gun. Few hunters in North Carolina actually pursue the woodcock as a primary game bird, but many woodcock are legally harvested as a by-product of more popular quail and grouse hunting. It is very different for some of the Northern states, like Vermont and Michigan, where woodcock are as highly prized as our bobwhite quail. Woodcock,

along with ruffed grouse, are the cornerstone of a proud gun-and-dog heritage in the North.

American woodcock are managed in two separate populations that are roughly divided by the Appalachian Mountains. Populations are generally on the decline in both the Eastern and Central units. Changing land use and a decline in early-successional habitat on the Northern breeding grounds is believed to account for the woodcock's "downward spiral." The basic problem is that the percentage of older forests is increasing while new growth forestland is on the decline. The resulting forest landscape is less suitable woodcock habitat. Wintering habitats are also on the decline in the South due to the loss of bottomland, hardwood forests. Short-term factors, such as the severe 1995-96 winter and harsh weather conditions on summer breeding grounds, also affect woodcock populations.

The bizarre appearance of the woodcock is matched by many of its behaviors and habits. As evidenced by their January displays, woodcock are some of the earliest birds to breed each season. Woodcock often breed during winter weather that sends more sensible birds to roost for long periods of inactivity. Historical accounts speak of woodcock eggs in late February, young in the nest in February with snow on the ground, and 6-week-old woodcock on March 26. The appetite of the little bird is also amazing, as woodcock kept in

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The Era of Cooperation

The Commission's focus on improving habitat for early-successional wildlife species by influencing habitat improvements at the landscape scale has taken a big step forward. The Commission has entered into an agreement with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) that should benefit wildlife populations across the state. The Commission and NRCS are each providing 50 percent of the salary of a new Commission employee who will be stationed in the NRCS state office.

Dennis Hosack, who holds a Ph.D. in Wildlife Management from the University of Georgia, has been hired to fill the position of agriculture liaison biologist. Among Dennis' first tasks will be to develop an agenda to provide training in the principles of wildlife management for NRCS and Division of Soil and Water Conservation employees working with landowners across the state. Emphasis will be placed on integrating wildlife management activities into the 1.8 million acres of farmland covered by NRCS Conservation Plans. ♦



Voices From the Past

The following article from the January 21, 1938 Raleigh News and Observer serves to remind us that the "quail decline" has been underway for a long time. It is interesting to note that the proposed "cures" for the decline that we hunters currently discuss have changed little during the past 60 years.

Group to Move to Save Quail

Eastern North Carolina Sportsmen to Gather in Kinston Tonight

Kinston, Jan. 20—All sportsmen interested in saving eastern North Carolina's quail are invited to attend a mass meeting in the courthouse here at 8 o'clock Friday. Steps to be recommended to the Department of Conservation and Development at Raleigh will be agreed upon. It is expected officials of the department and members of the General Assembly will attend the session.

Several addresses will be heard. All attending will be given opportunity to speak.

Kinston sportsmen, alarmed at the "rapid decrease" of quail, some weeks ago proposed that the Conservation Department forbid shooting of the birds for at least one year. That idea has been abandoned and the local men now suggest:

- That the split dove season be dispensed with—that the dove and quail season will be simultaneous.

- That owners of automatic and repeating shotguns be required to "plug" them—that hunters be permitted to use only one-, two-, and three-shot guns.

- That there be three closed days in every week of the season, to be known as "lay days." Lay days are important, according to Ellis Simon and Maj. Matt Allen, who helped to draft the "Kinston Plan." Allen is a former chairman of the State Industrial Commission.

- That the department establish a number of quail hatcheries, scattered over the State, and release quail at the end of each hunting season.

- That a Wild Life Club be organized in every county; that the clubs and land-owners provide feed for game birds; that bounties be paid for predatory animals and birds; that the members of the clubs cooperate with wardens by reporting out-of-season hunting and poaching and selling of birds.

- That persons convicted of hunting out of season or having game in their possession out of season be fined \$100 or sentenced to 30 days, with automatic suspension of license for two years. ♦

New Booklet Aids Landowners

The Sandhills Area Land Trust, a land conservancy located in southeastern North Carolina, has recently published a handbook titled *Working Forest: A Landowner's Guide For Growing Longleaf Pine in the Sandhills* to help landowners who wish to better manage their longleaf pine woodlands. The handbook, directed to conservation-minded landowners interested in growing and managing longleaf pine as a source of revenue, provides information about the history and

ecology of the longleaf ecosystem as well as an overview of the economics of various techniques for planting, managing, and harvesting longleaf pine. Sources for more information are included. ♦

Copies are available for \$5 plus \$1.50 postage and handling. Bulk orders (over 20) are \$3 per copy plus shipping. Contact the Sandhills Area Land Trust at (910)695-4323, FAX (910)695-3322, or P.O. Box 1032, Southern Pines, N.C. 28388.

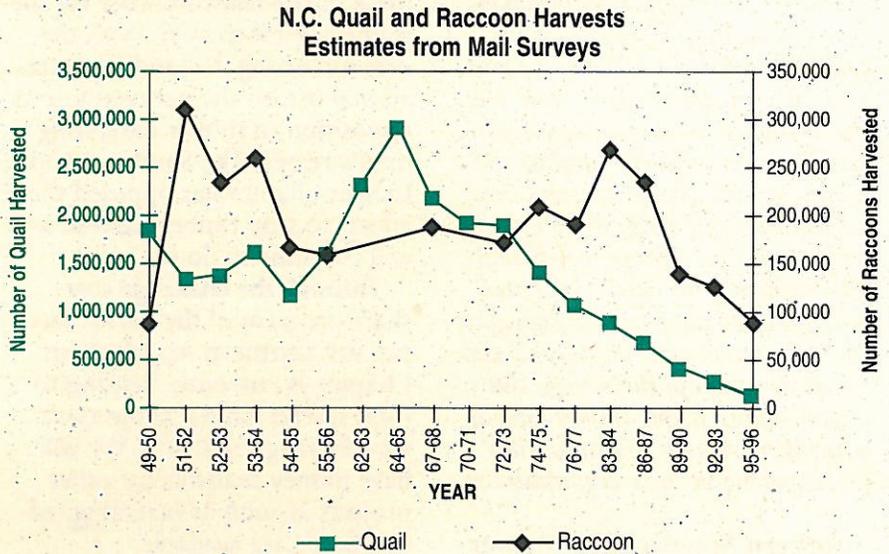
Mammal Predators—What is the Solution?

For the purposes of this article, let's assume mammalian predators (opossum, fox, raccoon and skunk) are having a negative impact on quail populations in North Carolina. First, let's take a look at what can be done to increase the numbers of these species harvested by both hunters and trappers?

The only practical way to significantly increase the harvest of these predators is to increase the price paid to hunters and trappers for pelts. History tells us that the harvest of foxes and raccoons is directly related to pelt prices. As the pelt prices increase or decrease, the number of animals harvested increases or decreases at a similar rate. The relationship between the opossum and skunk harvests is not directly related to pelt prices paid for those species. Most trappers harvest opossum and skunk while attempting to harvest fox or raccoon. To increase the harvest for all four species, you only need higher pelt prices for fox and raccoon pelts.

Fox and raccoon pelts are used to make fur hats and coats. The value of each fox and raccoon pelt is directly related to the value of the fur garment produced from it, and the value of these garments is related to supply and demand. Prices are high when demand is high and supply is low. The primary factors that determine demand for fur garments are fashion trends and available capital. When consumers with higher incomes wore fox and raccoon fur coats, the demand for raw pelts was high. But when fashion trends switched from full-length fur coats to leather coats with fur trim, demand for pelts decreased significantly. Raccoon hats are currently extremely popular in eastern Europe, but capital is very limited.

Despite fashion trends, fur garments are purchased by consum-



ers who live in areas where the winters are cold, and are worn primarily to keep warm. There has and will continue to be some level of demand for raw furs to produce fur coats and hats for consumers in cold climates. In the past, retail sales of fur coats have always increased in years with below-normal winter temperatures.

In addition to the cyclic demand for fur garments, we are now faced with a potential trade embargo implemented by European Union member countries on furs from animals that are trapped. This effort began in 1991 as a political ploy by European animal rights groups to hinder the harvest of wild animals in the United States and Canada. This trade restriction may be in place by the time you read this. The current impact of such action will be much less than it might have been 20 years ago because a significant portion of the raw furs produced in North America now go to China and Korea. Even a slight change in the political relationship with the United States and these countries could effectively shut down this fur trade avenue. Animal rights groups in the United States are

continuing to get legislation passed that makes trapping illegal. They are now attempting to block the use of sportsmen's money to both test traps and develop acceptable trapping standards that can be presented for approval to the general public. Some of these groups are even attempting to acquire sportsmen's funds to support their own anti-hunting and anti-trapping educational activities.

As a result of the efforts by animal rights groups to hinder furbearer harvest in North America, efforts to counter these groups have intensified in recent years. The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies through the Furbearer Technical Subcommittee is leading an effort to develop trapping "best management practices" which would be acceptable to both sportsmen and the general public. Having solid scientific information on trap performance, trap injuries, effects of harvest and other aspects of furbearer management will provide the basis for fighting efforts to pass legislation or initiatives that could hinder or eliminate furbearer harvest.

How likely is it that we can

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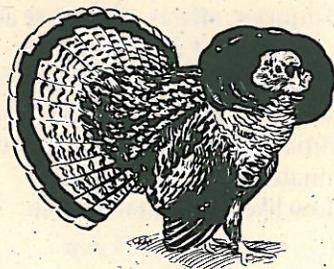
Conservation Organizations Focus on Game Bird Populations

Private conservation organizations have grown from a "good idea" to a dominant force in leading game bird conservation efforts in the state. We are fortunate to have active conservation groups in North Carolina supporting efforts to improve conditions for upland game birds. Steve Evans with the Ruffed Grouse Society and Bill Ashburn with Quail Unlimited have provided the following thoughts about the recent accomplishments and future direction of their respective organizations. If you are not already a member we urge you to consider participating in these organizations.

Southern Appalachian Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society

As most avid grouse hunters know, the loss of habitat is the biggest problem facing the ruffed grouse today. Over the past 20 years that I have been grouse hunting, I can count at least 25 places where I once hunted that are now housing developments. We are also seeing more "Posted" and "No Trespassing" signs on a great deal of the other land that was once hunt-able. Before long the only places left to hunt will be on public land.

The Southern Appalachian Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society is continuing to work with the various ranger districts in western North Carolina to ensure that there is enough grouse habitat on public land to meet the demands of hunters. As most of you probably know, grouse prefer early successional forest habitat. This means that timber harvest must take place on



these public lands in order for the prime habitat to exist. With the ever-increasing demand for recreational use on the national forests, opposition to timber harvesting has increased. The Southern Appalachian Chapter has opposed these efforts to stop timber harvest, and will continue to do so.

Through the challenge cost-share program of the Forest Service, the Southern Appalachian Chapter is currently helping to fund several habitat projects on various ranger districts. We will have money available for other projects as soon as matching federal funds are available.

For more information about the Southern Appalachian Chapter of the Ruffed Grouse Society, contact Steve Evans, Rt. 5, Box 516, Canton, N.C. 28716.

North Carolina Quail Unlimited

N.C. Quail Unlimited consists of 20 active chapters and some 2,500 current dues-paying members, who are divided almost equally between chapter members and at-large members. Q.U. chapters in North Carolina have worked closely with their state council to find and recruit quality chapters and membership throughout the state. The chapters as well as state council notables, General Lee and Dick Pope, have had great success with chapter assistance and creation, such as Wade Teague's Quail Point chapter in Goldsboro and Charles Trivette's Hunting Creek chapter in Harmony. Through work and enthusiasm, North Carolina has risen to fourth in the nation in working net, fourth in membership dues, and seventh in total (chapter) members.

We have been involved state-wide in studies and practices designed to identify and overcome the problems relating to quail loss and habitat reduction. Several of



these studies have put to rest much speculation regarding quail as to the use of pesticides in agricultural practices and the manner in which farmland is tended. Nest predation is also being considered and studied by Q.U. and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. North Carolina chapters are also participating in new and innovative techniques such as the aerial seeding in the Sandhills region and other areas of the state with annual lespedeza. Over the past three years, some 25,000 pounds of annual lespedeza have been seeded in cut-overs. While lespedeza will only last three to five years before losing out to plant competition and shade, it will provide enhanced brood cover and winter food throughout its lifetime. Many of our projects are coordinated with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission and N.C. State University in an effort to be leaders in the reestablishment of native quail habitat to our state. The Johnston, Davie and Carteret County chapters have received state and national recognition for their habitat accomplishments. Quail Unlimited is presently heading up, with Terry Sharpe of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, the Farm Wildlife Recovery Program, which holds promise for quail benefit in conjunction with agriculture.

Quail and quail habitat are not selfish in their benefits to nature. Much of what is good for quail is also good for rabbit, squirrel, songbirds, turkey and even deer. Dr. John Anderson of N.C. State University said very aptly that quail are an excellent barometer of the environment. When quail are abundant, the ecology is

We are working to expand our mailing list to include other interested landowners and sportsmen. Please pass along your copy to friends who may be interested. Send names of others who may find the information useful to: *The Upland Gazette*, Division of Wildlife Management, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, 512 N. Salisbury Street, Raleigh, N.C. 27604-1188.

(Note: Hunters who participated in last season's Avid Quail and Grouse Hunter Survey will automatically be included in future mailings and do not need to reply.)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Organizations *(continued)*

good. When quail are scarce and populations drastically decline, there is an ecology problem.

It is these problems that Q.U. chapters attempt to address every day by installing food plots and developing habitat projects. Members are also working to influence legislation that drastically affects the management tools available to landowners. A case in point is the "right to burn" bill, which was introduced last year in the North Carolina legislature. N.C. Quail Unlimited was afforded an opportunity by the N.C. Forest Service to comment and have input on this legislation. This legislation would directly reduce the liability of a landowner using controlled fire in an appropriate manner to manage his woodland. The goal of Quail Unlimited in North Carolina is nothing less than the reestablishment of natural quail by the identification and correction of the problems relating to their decline.

Some say that the answer for quail hunters is in new release methods for pen raised quail. These methods, while providing

short-term relief, are nothing more than any other fancied-up, put-and-take system. The releasing of birds for game, whether or not you adapt them to their environment, is still an artificial process and is in no way an answer to the decline in quail populations in North Carolina. I have no objection to put-and-take operations, as they do provide excellent opportunities for people to hunt and secure game; but any manner of artificially releasing non-native birds for sport is put-and-take.

North Carolina has been very fortunate this year in obtaining a commitment from the national Quail Unlimited organization to hold its annual convention within our state. The convention will be held in Charlotte on Aug. 27-29, 1998. Through this convention, we hope to introduce many new faces to Q.U. membership as well as enlighten many sportsmen through the sports exhibition and the seminars which will be conducted in conjunction with the



event. There will be many well-qualified speakers from across the country addressing a myriad of topics relating to quail, their habitat, and related problems across the United States. All North Carolina sportsmen who are interested in the sport of quail hunting or who would welcome the chance to view some excellent and unusual sporting items are invited to attend.

If you are a sportsman, a quail hunter, or merely interested in the promotion of wildlife and its habitat, we would welcome you to participate with any of the local chapters and their projects. By joining a local chapter and adding your voice to our purpose, you can affect the future of quail and small game in North Carolina through participation in chapter projects.

For more information about Quail Unlimited, contact Donnie Buckland, Q.U. regional director, at P.O. Box 1110, Stuart, Va. 24171, or Bill Ashburn, N.C. State Chairman, at 108B N. McMorrine St., Suite 200, Elizabeth City, N.C. 27909. ♦

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Mammal Predators *(continued)*

influence the fur industry to increase demand for fox and raccoon pelts? Extremely unlikely, unfortunately. Louisiana was able to create a market for nutria in an effort to increase harvests and protect coastal marsh habitat. What Louisiana couldn't do is keep the demand for nutria pelts high enough over time so that harvest levels would be sufficiently high for the state to reach its goals.

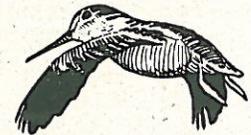
Finally, let's take a closer look at our original assumption. Would high prices for fox and raccoon pelts affect harvest enough to create a significant increase in quail populations? Clues to an answer can be found in data collected from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s when fox and raccoon pelt prices and harvests reached the highest levels ever. Records indicate that the long, downhill decline in quail

populations was well underway before the peak in fur harvest, and high fur harvests which persisted from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s did little to slow the decline in small-game harvests (see graph on page 3).

In the 1970s and through much of the 1980s we experienced the highest levels of furbearer harvest and participation by hunters and trappers. Participation and harvest fell dramatically in the late 1980s until hitting record low levels in the 1990s. Though we are currently seeing moderate increases in fur harvests we lost a lot of trappers and hunters when fur prices fell and to date many have not returned. Future trends in fur prices are anyone's guess. Unfortunately, if we are interpreting our data correctly, higher harvest levels of furbearers will not guarantee better quail populations. ♦

Downward Spiral *(continued)*

captivity have been found to eat twice their weight in earth-



worms in a 24-hour period!

Those few North Carolina hunters who pursue timberdoodles know the birds hold well and are a favorite for bird dogs. They make excellent sport and are a tasty game bird when properly prepared. While the timberdoodle will never replace the bobwhite quail or ruffed grouse in our state, it is a unique gamebird worthy of the respect of hunters and a favorite of those bird watchers who are familiar with its spiraling sky-dance mating ritual. ♦

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