

## **BOBWHITE MANAGEMENT AND HUNTING IN FLORIDA'S RANGLANDS: AN OVERVIEW OF RULES AND REGULATIONS**

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Florida's ranchlands region can provide some exceptional and unique bobwhite quail hunting when the habitat conditions are right. In fact, some landowners in the ranchlands region realize that good bobwhite hunting, particularly for wild birds, is a valuable commodity if marketed and packaged properly. When you combine the exciting action of bobwhite hunting with the impressive scenery and open vistas of Florida ranchlands, landowners know they can provide a very powerful and appealing hunting experience.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is very committed to helping Florida's landowners further develop and enhance bobwhite quail management and hunting across the state. The FWC recognizes that Florida's ranchlands region is a key area for restoring bobwhite habitats and hunting, and that landowners and land managers in this region hold the future of south Florida bobwhite quail hunting in their hands. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the rules and regulations that provide the legal frameworks for bobwhite hunting on private lands in Florida. This information is intended to help foster understanding of legal requirements and assist landowners and land managers in setting up or improving bobwhite management and hunting programs.

The bobwhite quail goes by many names, but the official common name is the "northern bobwhite" and the official Latin or scientific name is *Colinus virginianus virginianus*. We have a unique subspecies found only in central and south Florida commonly called the "Florida bobwhite" or *Colinus virginianus floridanus*. FWC rules use the title "quail", but for the purpose of this paper, we will refer to this prized game bird simply as the "bobwhite".

### **SEASONS, BAG LIMITS, AND METHODS OF TAKE**

In Florida, the bobwhite is legally defined as a "game bird" and further defined as a "resident game bird." Bobwhites also are defined as "legal game" that may be taken during open seasons established by FWC rules. The open season established for taking bobwhites begins on the second Saturday of November and closes 113 days thereafter every year. For the upcoming 2005-2006 hunting season, those actual dates are November 12, 2005 through March 5, 2006. For hunters who want to use their muzzleloading gun, bobwhites also may be taken during the nine-day muzzleloading gun season which occurs in mid-October into early November in the south and central parts of the state.

FWC rules also establish daily bag and possession limits for bobwhites; the daily bag limit is 12 birds, and the possession limit is 24. The legal shooting hours for resident game birds including bobwhites are during the daytime only, between one-half hour before sunrise and one-half hour after sunset. Bobwhites may be taken with shotguns, rifles, pistols, falcons, bows or crossbows, although shotguns are by far the most effective and preferred method of take. FWC rules do not allow use of live decoys, recorded game calls or sounds, set guns, artificial light, net, trap, snare, drug, or poison to take or attempt to take bobwhites.

## **SUPPLEMENTAL FEEDING**

Some managers use supplemental feeding as a tool to enhance bobwhite populations and hunting opportunities. The pros, cons, and recommended methods are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is advisable for managers to research supplemental feeding carefully and develop a sound plan before implementing this management tool. Supplemental feeding for bobwhite management and hunting is permitted under FWC rules.

Specifically, FWC rules allow game feeders to be set up and maintained for the purpose of propagating bobwhites under natural conditions on private lands. These rules also allow bobwhites to be hunted or harvested in proximity to “game feeding stations”, but only where these feeding stations have been maintained at least six months prior to the start of any hunting activities. A game feeding station may be developed in many ways and forms. It can be an actual quail feeder placed on the ground, or it can be an area where feed is scattered over the ground. To comply with this rule and guard against possible disease or predator problems, managers should establish a good number of feeding stations near good escape cover and alternate the use of these stations periodically.

## **BIRD DOG TRAINING**

Good quality bobwhite hunting depends on having hard working, well trained bird dogs. FWC rules are very responsive and open to providing opportunity for bird dog training on private lands; bird dog training is basically allowed year round. When the bobwhite hunting season is closed, bird dog training is allowed with the aid of a pistol firing a blank or a solid ball. Many managers or “dog handlers” like to use pen-raised bobwhites to train bird dogs. FWC rules allow this throughout the year, and these pen-raised birds may be taken by shotgun while training bird dogs provided each bird is banded before being released. Since pen-raised bobwhites can be costly, some managers set up traps or call-back pens to recapture pen-raised birds after training sessions so they can be used again. FWC rules allow this practice if each quail trap is tagged with the name and address of the user and if all pen-raised bobwhites used for this purpose are identified with leg bands showing the name of a licensed game farm, private hunting preserve, or the individual using the birds.

And finally, FWC rules require immediate release of any wild bobwhite that may be trapped during the process of trapping pen-raised birds.

### **PRIVATE HUNTING PRESERVES**

FWC rules allow private landowners or lessees to establish and operate private or commercial hunting preserves where bobwhite hunting can be featured. The primary advantages associated with a licensed private or commercial hunting preserve are the ability to charge a commercial fee for bobwhite hunting, longer open seasons, flexibility with regard to individual hunting license requirements, and bag limit exemptions for hunting pen-raised bobwhites. A hunting preserve license is not necessary if the landowner is not charging a commercial fee for bobwhite hunting and only wishes to allow bobwhite hunting within the established open season, within the established individual bag/possession limits, and understands that individual hunters are required to have a state hunting license.

The license fee structure for private hunting preserves is established under Florida Statutes. There are two licensing options: 1) a "private" or "basic" hunting preserve license and 2) a "commercial" or "blanket" hunting preserve. The "private/basic" license costs \$70 annually and provides all the benefits of a licensed hunting preserve except each individual hunting on the property must have a state hunting license (\$12.50 each). The "commercial/blanket" license costs \$500 annually in addition to the \$70 fee for the "private/basic" license. Under the "commercial/blanket" hunting preserve license (\$570 total license fee), individuals hunting bobwhites on the licensed property are not required to have a state hunting license. Also, the commercial/blanket license is reserved only for private hunting preserves that are operated exclusively for commercial purposes, are open to the public, and where a uniform fee for hunting is charged to patrons.

As indicated earlier, one of the primary benefits of being a licensed hunting preserve is the longer open season for bobwhite hunting. The normal bobwhite hunting season is early November through early March, whereas on licensed private or commercial hunting preserves, the open season for hunting bobwhites is from October 1 through April 20; about two months longer. This option provides increased time and flexibility for scheduling bobwhite hunts, which can be particularly helpful on commercial hunting preserves.

Licensed hunting preserves offer other advantages to landowners or managers who wish to supplement or even replace wild bobwhite hunting with released, pen-raised bobwhite hunting. There are pros and cons associated with use of pen-raised bobwhites and many different techniques to maximize the benefits of using released birds for hunting. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper, and while pen-raised bobwhites serve a useful purpose, it is important to note that maintaining good quality habitats to sustain healthy populations of wild bobwhites is critical to having a bright future for bobwhite hunting in Florida.

With that said, use of pen-raised bobwhites on hunting preserves does allow for more liberal harvests. In fact, there is no bag limit for pen-raised bobwhites taken on hunting preserves, and released birds that are not harvested may be trapped on the property for reuse. It is important to note, however, that pen-raised birds must be leg-banded if they are being re-trapped or released for hunting outside the established open season for wild bobwhite hunting so they can be distinguished from wild bobwhites. Also, any wild bobwhites that are trapped in association with trapping for pen-raised bobwhites must be released immediately.

There are several basic requirements that must be met to obtain a license for a private hunting preserve. The landowner or lessee must complete and submit an application with the appropriate annual license fee to FWC, and the property must then be inspected by FWC. A licensed hunting preserve can be no larger than 10,000 acres. If the property is within one mile of a wildlife management area (WMA), refuge or park, it must be determined that operation of the hunting preserve will not conflict with the management objectives of the WMA, park, or refuge or will not pose adverse impacts to wildlife or public safety. The owner or manager of the WMA, park, or refuge must be notified of the application and given the opportunity to comment on the application or provide recommendations.

Once a license is issued, the private hunting preserve is required to follow specific rules and requirements. The property boundaries must be legally posted with signs that indicate the property is a licensed hunting preserve. If pen-raised birds are released for hunting, the operator must maintain documents to demonstrate these birds are in healthy condition and were legally produced at a licensed game farm or preserve. If a quantity of harvested game birds is transported from a hunting preserve, the container must be tagged or labeled with information about the preserve and the game taken. The operator must maintain a registration book and maintain records about each hunter and game taken. These records and the facilities must be open to inspection by FWC personnel upon request.

To download a hunting preserve license application or a complete copy of the hunting preserve rules, please visit the FWC website at the following address: [http://myfwc.com/permits/#Hunting\\_GameFarms](http://myfwc.com/permits/#Hunting_GameFarms)

## **TRANSLOCATION OF WILD BOBWHITES**

There are many areas in Florida where bobwhite populations thrived in the past, but habitat conditions have degraded and bobwhite populations are severely suppressed or absent. In some cases, with proper habitat management, bobwhite populations can be recovered, but it may take several years to reach population levels that can sustain hunting pressure. The FWC is

committed to encouraging and supporting the restoration of bobwhite habitats across the state and particularly in the ranchlands region; however, there is no doubt that habitat restoration, particularly to recover bobwhite populations, is expensive and takes a lot of time and effort. For landowners and managers to make the necessary investment, they need to have as much assurance as possible that bobwhite populations will respond to their habitat management efforts, and they need to find ways to reduce the recovery period as much as possible.

For many years, biologists and managers have searched for ways to “jump start” bobwhite populations where habitat conditions have been restored but the birds are absent or slow to recover. Study after study has shown that pen-raised bobwhites are not the answer to this challenge. These birds just do not survive well enough in the wild to fuel a bobwhite population recovery in the wild, even in excellent habitat. Recent and ongoing studies suggest, however, that translocation of wild bobwhites may show some promise for accelerating restoration efforts.

Translocation is a process where wild bobwhites are trapped from a donor site then relocated and reestablished in restored and well managed habitat. We all still have a lot to learn about how best to trap, relocate, and establish wild bobwhites, and this approach is not suitable in many situations. However, to help provide incentives for restoring and maintaining bobwhite habitat, FWC is willing to work with landowners wishing to consider translocation as a bobwhite population recovery option.

It is important to note that a permit from FWC is required to legally trap and relocate wild bobwhites in Florida. FWC is currently in the process of developing the conditions that must be met to be eligible for a permit. It is important to have sound conditions for permitting translocation of wild bobwhites based on the best available science so this highly valuable resource is not wasted in situations where population recovery is not likely.

One key condition will be that the applicant for the translocation permit will be responsible for securing a suitable source of wild bobwhites from a donor site. In addition, FWC will be working to determine the minimum size of properties eligible for translocation; specific conditions for donor properties; procedures for trapping, transport, and release of wild birds; post release monitoring; recovery period before hunting; and management plan requirements. FWC is partnering with the University of Florida to develop standardized habitat and quail population assessment and monitoring programs, and to coordinate all translocation projects within Florida.

