

## PEN-RAISED QUAIL: THEIR USE AND PROBLEMS FOR WILD BIRDS

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A discussion of Pen-raised vs. Wild Quail I believe has to start with an understanding of what makes a good hunt. For everyone, the answer to that question probably is very different. For me, it is based upon my experiences growing up and quail hunting with my dad.

When I think about what made those hunts so special, it really was not whether the birds were pen-raised or wild. It was things such as the smell of the canvas top of the jeep, it was a pointer so good that I believed he could find birds in a city parking lot, and it was the noon lunch of Vienna sausage and saltine crackers. Yet for me, if we had been releasing pen-raised birds, I do not believe that the memories and the experiences would be the same. If I had never hunted wild quail, I would not know there is any difference. It is all in the collection of our experiences.

How can we use pen-raised birds? What are the positives and negatives? For those individuals without large acreage and suitable habitat for wild birds, then the use of pen-raised birds probably makes sense for them. But, is it the right thing to do? If it is a put and take situation, then there are probably not a lot of problems associated with the practice.

If however, we are trying to increase breeding populations by stocking pen-raised birds, then I think we are in a different ball game. Most biologists consider this unjustified and there are possible implications for native quail populations. There is the potential for strongly increasing predation, especially by birds such as hawks and owls. We should also be concerned with introduction of diseases (i.e., pullorum, fowl typhoid, avian pox, quail bronchitis, etc.), food and or breeding mate competition, and displacement of wild birds. I am not sure if there are any detectable differences genetically between pen-raised and wild birds. However, the real differences will be in environmental and learned behavior. Think about how pen-raised birds are hatched, and then compare that thought to a hen setting on the nest and “talking” to those unborn chicks. Well, “talking” is probably the wrong term; it is called prenatal auditory or hen contentment calls.

Pen-raised quail will often exhibit the following trait differences:

- ◆ Fail to recognize predators and some natural foods
- ◆ Slightly larger size
- ◆ Will fly slower and shorter distances

- ◆ Will not flush as readily
- ◆ Will tend to run more
- ◆ Less fear of humans
- ◆ Survival in to the second year is usually less than 1% (about 20% for wild birds)
- ◆ Almost all fail to nest and successfully raise a brood

At the time of writing this article, I found that the cost of purchasing pen-raised birds averaged about \$3.25 per bird for small numbers of birds, with a discount for larger orders. There is also a difference in price between young and adult, as well as pen-raised and cage-raised birds. When considering whether to use pen-raised birds for hunting, several economic factors should be considered: buying and releasing birds vs. feeding and managing wild birds; costs of owning or leasing large acreages to support wild coveys; and the need for less dogs when hunting pen-raised birds.

Many shooting preserves/plantations will augment their harvest by using pen-raised birds. Some operations will release birds 1-2 months prior to the hunting season. In these situations, birds are often released in coveys of 15-20 birds. Other operations will release birds the day of or maybe the evening before the hunt, often as singles, pairs, and small groups of 4-6 birds. I think one advantage of using pen-raised birds is that you get to select the habitat they are released in. We typically avoid releasing birds in areas of extremely rough escape habitats in order to avoid losing singles or crippled birds, and make hunting easier on dogs and people.

Remember, quail have 3 important habitat requirements: nesting, foraging, and escape. Forget the nesting habitat; these birds will never make it to late spring/early summer to mate/nest. Focus instead on foraging and escape cover habitat that are close to each other. The actual release site should be an open area interspersed with thickets comprised of young trees and shrubs. Also, remember that these birds have been raised behind wire enclosures and have never experienced predators. Covey boxes should be put out early in the morning and left open. Later that day, all boxes should be picked up to avoid leaving scents for predators to be drawn to. The use of a "call back caged cock" has been used by many of the game managers to help bring back the birds to the covey box.

Pen-raised birds will probably exhibit a smaller range (15-20 acres) than wild birds (up to 40 acres). Keep in mind that pen-raised birds will fly slower and shorter distances than wild birds. The need for escape cover in close proximity will be very important to their survival.

What are other considerations for the use of pen-raised quail that you should consider? Over the past several years I have participated in numerous

quail hunts where pen-raised birds were utilized. The following are some of my observations about their use:

- ◆ Even birds raised in flight pens will often not fly like a wild quail
- ◆ These short distance “hops” of flight become dangerous for overzealous bird dogs when hunters are quick to shoot
- ◆ In put and take situations, I have seen dogs go directly to boxes, flags, etc. and point with the expectation that there would be quail there
- ◆ Flight patterns can be very erratic, putting hunters and equipment at risk if safety is not uppermost in their minds
- ◆ When dogs are not made to work, I think that their hunting skill is lessened to some degree. My theory here is the harder we work at something the better we get at it and I believe the same for a bird dogs

This leads to the last item that I will discuss; the effects of pen-raised birds on the bird dogs. One consistent and significant problem is dogs catching live birds. My experience with this has been that on the next point, the dog does not hold as well and wants to catch birds live again. Some people use them to train their dogs; others will not use their dogs ever on pen-raised birds. I have not seen material on studies done on this aspect of pen-raised birds, but it is a topic that many of you I know are interested in knowing about.

