

THE PRESERVE PICTURE

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Native Bobwhite quail populations in Florida, like many other areas of the South, have declined. Quail hunting preserves have begun to fill the void resulting from decreasing numbers of wild quail available for private and public land hunters. Licensed hunting preserves generally rely on pen-raised birds to enhance quail shooting opportunities. Many of us recall the days of hunting wild bobwhites with our father or grandfather when all that was required was a rough piece of pine and palmetto flatwoods and a reliable set of pointers. If three to five coveys were found in a days hunt, it was enough to satisfy our efforts to enjoy the outdoors and the camaraderie of being afield with family and friends. The new generation of hunters is a different breed. These hunters are fast paced and want to see a lot of birds in a short period of time. The enjoyment of a day afield in pursuit of bobwhite quail in the traditional style of early southern plantations is a highly sought after pastime for many. However, the management and upkeep of a kennel of well trained dogs, the cost of managing owned or leased land, the expense of purchasing and maintaining the proper field hunting transportation, and other inputs makes hunting these critters well out of reach for the vast majority of hunters.

Enter the licensed hunting preserve. Preserves have much to offer—from the essentials such as well managed grounds, comfortable transportation, plenty of good flying birds to test the skills of dogs, and gunners, all the way up to high end complex operations that offer overnight accommodations with fine dining, training and boarding of dogs, clay target shooting, guides, shooting instructors, and bird cleaning. You name it. Fees for hunting trips can range from \$200 to \$700 per day, depending on services and amenities. Traditional, old-style plantation hunting may cost as much as \$2,000 per day. Hunts are generally booked in advance for either half or full day outings. Instead of the work and expense involved in maintaining all of the requirements for enjoying quail hunting as a leisurely pastime, a sportsman/woman can shop around and locate a good preserve that matches his/her needs and budget.

A properly operated commercial quail hunting operation is not only obligated to entertain their guests in style, but must deliver in all areas if the operation is to stay in business, break even or show a profit. Because of this obligation, at a bare minimum, the hunter should find a good number of hard flying birds and a staff that knows how to offer traditional hospitality. Additional services (shooting instruction, clay target shooting, and overnight accommodations) are usually optional. In addition to the basics, shooting preserves offer extended season dates and unlimited bag limits on birds. Most important is the fact that a preserve is a place where hunters are not just

permitted but are welcomed, and where the atmosphere revolves around hunting, guns, dogs, birds, and shooting. Most preserves offer hunters the opportunity to bring their own dogs, if they so choose. Many find this a great way to ready their dogs for wild birds and to emphasize basic training for a puppy. In addition, preserves are a great place to introduce an adult just “taking up” hunting or a youngster being introduced to the game.

The flip side of our discussion is to cover the basics of establishing a preserve on raw land. Many landowners in the Southeast have turned to preserve hunting as an additional side venture and profitable enterprise to their established agricultural enterprises. Interested parties can begin by setting aside as little as 100 to 200 acres and posting it to be licensed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Traditional habitat management for wild quail populations, i.e., prescribed burning, roller chopping, food plot establishment, and feed supplementation, may be required for each potential preserve site. Establishment of escape cover such as native palmetto thickets or plantings of sesbania or lespedeza is required. These sites must also provide critical cover from avian predators. The propagation of pen-released quail may be relied on for the majority of the commercial hunting opportunities. An early release program (4 to 8 weeks prior to hunting) or put and take (release just prior to shooting) will be dependent on the amount of hunting pressure and the abundance of predators. Other overhead considerations will include liability policies, cost of guides, cost of transportation equipment, and advertising.

Advantages of shooting preserves include the following:

- The potential of being relatively profitable
- A long hunting season
- Instant quality hunting
- Predictable harvest opportunities
- Small acreage to manage

Disadvantages include the following:

- Large capital investment
- High business risk for the operator
- High management costs
- Relatively small clientele market
- Limited availability of qualified employees

