

# PACKSADDLE

## Wildlife Management Area

BY MICAH HOLMES



Those who claim that western Oklahoma is flat and featureless must have never taken a drive out west, much less stepped out of their cars west of I-35. And they certainly have never scuffed up a pair of boots at the Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area.

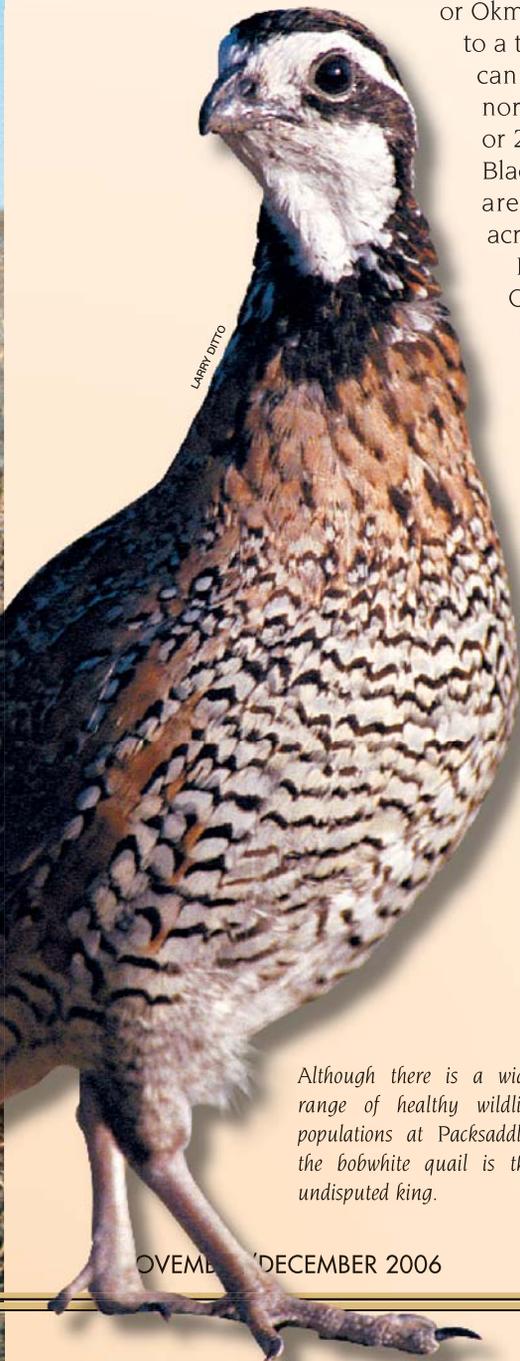
Covering 17,000 acres in northwest Oklahoma's Ellis County, Packsaddle is one of the most scenic areas in the state. The meandering South Canadian River bottomlands set the southern boundary for the area as it slopes - gently at first and later quite steeply - to the north where a mixed grass prairie with shinnery oak dominates. Everywhere in between there are scenic vistas, a diversity of plants and trees, and wildlife - lots of wildlife.

Although there is a wide range of healthy wildlife populations at Packsaddle, the bobwhite quail is the undisputed king. The native grasses, sandy soils and huge blocks of contiguous habitat on the area are a time-tested recipe for producing quail like few other areas in United States. The secret is out among hunters.

On any given late-January day, one might see license plates from hunters from Minnesota, Georgia or Ohio, plus hunters from Ada, Durant or Okmulgee. As an added bonus to a trip to Packsaddle, hunters can travel 20 minutes to the north to Ellis County WMA or 20 minutes to the south to Black Kettle WMA. The three areas cover about 50,000 acres of first-rate quail cover.

Relative to the age of other Oklahoma wildlife management areas, Packsaddle is just a baby. Wildlife Department personnel recognized the unique potential of the area and purchased the 6,500-acre Dunn Ranch in the late 1980's when the property came up for sale. In the following years, the Wildlife Department purchased other surrounding properties from willing sellers and the area was opened to sportsmen in 1990.

The land had been well cared for and there was no massive restoration effort necessary when the Wildlife Department assumed owner-



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### **Where Did the Name "Packsaddle" Come From?**

No one really knows for sure, although there are plenty of good guesses and speculation. The consensus is that early settlers called the South Canadian River crossing (where the Highway 283 bridge is today) the Packsaddle crossing. Crossing the river was once much more of a chore than it is today, and the narrow, shallow area of the river served as a natural funnel for settlers heading north or south to Ellis or Roger Mills counties.

Some say it was called the Packsaddle crossing because the terrain formed the shape of saddle, while others say the name came from the story of a pack saddle that was left on the bank by an army soldier fleeing a band of Indians.

### **Home on the Range**

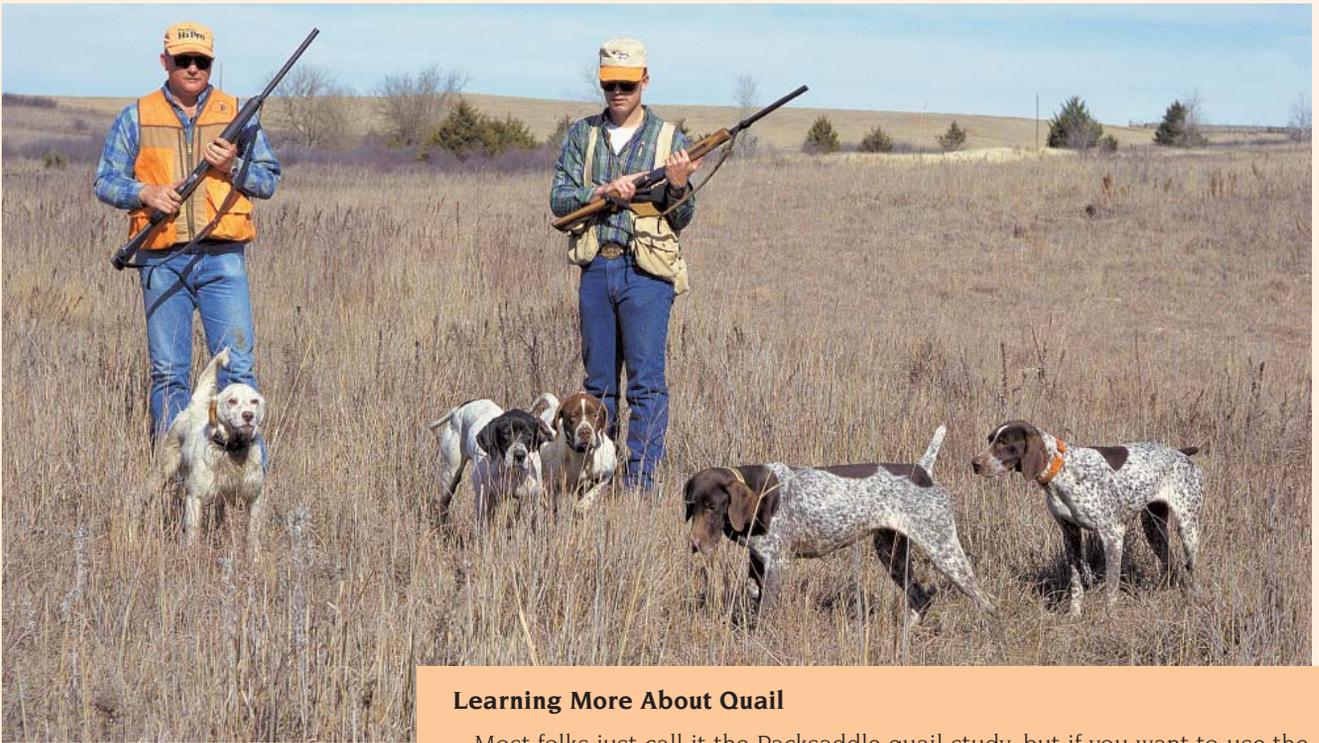
In 2000, the Oklahoma Archeological Survey completed a survey of Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area. They found 47 different sites where people had once lived or worked. About half of those areas were old homesteads dating back to the early 1900's. Many of the early settlers found the land ill-suited for growing crops and moved on. The surveyors also found evidence that American Indians came through the area to collect stone for arrow heads and other tools.

### **Packsaddle at a Glance**

#### **Area Description:**

Packsaddle WMA covers 17,000 acres, and is located in Ellis County 17 miles south of Arnett on Highway 283. Located in the mixed grass prairie, it is a mixture of rolling sand hills and wooded bottoms with the South Canadian River as its southern boundary.

Uplands sites are vegetated with mixed grass species including big bluestem, Indian grass, little bluestem, side-oats grama, and buffalo grass and brush species like shinnery oak, sagebrush, and sand plum. Bottomlands are dominated by cottonwood, elm, and hackberry trees. The average annual precipitation for the area is about 25 inches.



*With good friends and good dogs, it is hard to beat at day of quail hunting at Packsaddle WMA.*

### Learning More About Quail

Most folks just call it the Packsaddle quail study, but if you want to use the official name, call it the Analysis of Bobwhite Movement and Survival on the Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area. No matter what you call it, the huge, 10-year-long study provided some very interesting facts on the lives of bobwhite quail in Oklahoma.

Biologists used radio transmitters to track the daily movements of quail across the Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area beginning in 1991. Biologists also studied diets, reproduction rates and hunter success.

Perhaps the most significant finding in the study was that bobwhites in western Oklahoma can move large distances during the fall and spring. It was once thought that a covey of quail could live out their life on the "back 40," however, the study revealed that quail may use large blocks of habitat. During the fall biologists tracked almost half the quail moving two or more miles from the research area. Ten to 15 mile movements were fairly common and a few quail moved 37-44 miles. One female actually moved more than 41 miles but ended up only 3 miles from where she hatched (she moved from the WMA to Cheyenne back to private land near the WMA on the South Canadian River). Not as many birds moved during the spring, but those that did, commonly moved four to five miles, a few moved 8-12 miles and one bird moved 16 miles.

Here are a few of the other interesting facts discovered through the study:

- Quail feeders did not increase bobwhite survival or increase bobwhite population numbers. Also, predation from hawks was higher on the supplemental feed area.
- About one in four male bobwhites share in incubating the eggs.
- 24 percent of female bobwhites attempted second nests.
- Bobwhite chicks typically stay with a parent for 39 days and a little over one in three bobwhite chicks survive 39 days after hatching.
- Adult bobwhites will adopt and/or abandon chicks. In fact, 17 percent of bobwhite broods ended up with more chicks than were hatched from the nest.

To learn more about the quail studies at Packsaddle, log on to [www.wildlifedepartment.com/quailresearch.htm](http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/quailresearch.htm)



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ship. Instead, area biologists could focus on making the area even better for wildlife. Biologists initiated a prescribed burning program, planted trees, and began strip disking and built food plots. With grants from the National Wild Turkey Federation, biologists removed invasive red cedars and salt cedars along the river to enhance, and in the hopes of, establishing new turkey roost sites.

While quail may be king at Packsaddle, there is plenty of room for other wildlife in the kingdom. Packsaddle is home to a thriving turkey population and hunters have a fair shot at harvesting a tom in the spring. Additionally, deer hunters harvest about 60 deer each year off the area, including the occasional wall-hanger buck. On a rare occasion, a hunter may even spot a mule deer. The area is open for all three types of hunting - archery, muzzleloader and gun. Although the first weekend of gun season is typically reserved for controlled hunts.

Whatever game species you are after, bring your hiking boots. The area has few interior roads. This offers plenty of opportunities for hunters to "get away from it all" and find new areas to pursue game.

The Packsaddle Wildlife Management Area is an Oklahoma treasure. Make plans to head out on an adventure and you just might make a memory that will last a lifetime. 🌿

## Description of Wildlife

### Management Practices:

Management efforts focus on producing native cover plants and wildlife foods such as ragweed and sunflower, although some small agricultural food plots are planted annually. A controlled burning program has been implemented. Wildlife watering facilities have been installed, including windmills, water guzzlers, and small ponds. Limited cattle grazing is used to increase quail food abundance and improve brood habitat. Vehicle access is limited with few interior roads open to the public.

### Camping and Facilities

Nine designated primitive camping areas are located on the area. Both lodging and restaurants are available 17 miles north in Arnett and 22 miles south in Cheyenne.

### For Additional Information and Area Attractions

To view maps and aerial photos of Packsaddle WMA log on to [wildlifedepartment.com](http://wildlifedepartment.com)

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#### Oklahoma Tourism & Recreation Department

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[www.travelok.com](http://www.travelok.com)

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GLENN HAYES



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