

2012 Quail Season Outlook

By

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The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation has conducted annual roadside surveys in August and October since 1990 to index quail populations across Oklahoma. Department employees run 83, 20-mile routes in all counties except Oklahoma and Tulsa. Larger counties like Beaver, Ellis, LeFlore, McCurtain, Osage, Pittsburg, and Roger Mills have two routes. Observers count the number of quail observed and classify the size of the young birds comprising broods to provide an index of quail abundance (number seen/20 mile route) and reproductive success and timing. This report combines the August and October surveys to provide a composite index of statewide quail abundance and individual state region (Figure 1).

This marks the 23rd year that roadside quail surveys have been conducted in Oklahoma. The statewide index has declined from 2011 survey results and is 85% below the 22-year average (Table 1). The 2012 statewide index decreased 25% from the previous year. However, the number of quail observed in Northwest, North-central, and Southeast regions slightly increased over 2011 results. Every year regional differences are seen in survey results due primarily to the effects of weather and land use such as livestock grazing that can affect quail nesting conditions.

Weather plays an important role in quail production and habitat quality and quantity. Last year Oklahoma had record heat and severe drought and the population declined. The lack of rain also affected the amount of nesting cover available for the 2012 nesting season. This year Oklahoma had a favorable winter which helped with the carryover of birds into the nesting season and during the spring most of the state received some much needed moisture helping produce a large amount of forbs and insects. However, once the nesting season began the amount of rainfall was limited and the temperatures began to climb, lowering the chances of quail having multiple hatches. There were areas throughout Oklahoma that did see some spotty showers providing some brief relief from the drought and could show better population numbers in isolated areas.

Western Oklahoma remains in the forefront for quail habitat in Oklahoma and will typically have the best population of birds in the state. Precipitation in the western part of the state was good through April but declined during the following months. The early rainfall increased the amount of forbs that attract insects and provided good brooding cover. This additional cover may have aided in first nesting attempt success but later in the nesting season the conditions began to degrade. However, northwest Oklahoma did see a 33% increase over the 2011 survey which could be explained by spotty showers and a break in high temperatures later in the nesting season that could have allowed for late nesting attempts.

Central Oklahoma also received early precipitation in April but then dropped off later in the nesting season. This early weather could have allowed for early season nesting

attempts, but as temperatures began to rise, later nesting attempts were not as successful. North-central did see an increase during the survey over 2011 which could be a result of spotty showers in the region later in the nesting season. The region also received a break in temperatures in August that could have provided an opportunity of late nesting attempts. This whole region has areas scattered throughout that have quality quail habitat that can provide good hunting and with the chance of a late season hatch there could be an opportunity to chase a few quail.

Much of eastern Oklahoma does not provide high quality quail habitat due to extensive changes in land use that have been detrimental to quail such as conversion of native prairie to introduced grasses and encroachment of brush due to lack of fire. Most of this region didn't receive much precipitation until August providing some opportunity for late season nesting attempts. This is likely reflected in the survey results with the increase in the southeast region over last year. Lack of habitat in combination with the severe drought is expected to result in low quail numbers in much of the eastern part of the state. However, there are areas where timber harvest and intense management for quail has taken place resulting in some nesting success and where quail numbers will provide some hunting opportunity.

Reports from the field have been mixed, so the true test of reproductive success will come on November 10th when the season begins and Oklahoma quail hunters take to the field and begin their own survey efforts.

Table 1. Average number of quail seen/20 mile route during the August & October roadside surveys.

Region	1990-2011 22-yr. average	2011	2012
Statewide	6.1	1.2	0.9
Northwest	8.7	1.8	2.4
North-central	3.2	0.1	0.2
Northeast	3.5	0.5	0.2
Southwest	13.3	3.8	1.3
South-central	2.4	0.7	0.4
Southeast	5.9	0.5	0.6

Figure 1

Regional boundaries for Oklahoma used for quail roadside surveys.





