

Northern Bobwhite Status Report, 2020

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 20-2



Photo by Adele Hodde

Northern Bobwhite Quail Hunting in Illinois

Quail hunting in Illinois was very popular for most of the early and mid-1900's with well over 150,000 hunters. Harvest was estimated at over 2 million quail per year from the 1950's through the early 1970's. Due primarily to changes in land use and farming practices, this abundant game bird which was a by-product of the agricultural landscape in the early part of the 20th century began a dramatic decline in the mid 1970's (Figure 1). Estimates of harvest and the number of quail hunters put this decline in perspective; by 1990, there were 84,000 hunters and they harvested 937,000 birds. Ten years later, there were 40,500 quail hunters and harvest was 271,500 birds. The small, diverse farms of the 1950's had abundant small grains (wheat, oats etc.), livestock and hay fields with lots of fencerows and hedgerows separating small fields that provided great cover for quail.

Today, corn and soybeans have replaced most of the small grains, pastures, and hayfields that were once common in Illinois. The hedgerows and fencerows provided cover for game are gone or have been 'cleaned up' with herbicide, leaving very little habitat and eliminating travel corridors between the remaining blocks of habitat. In addition, field size and the size of equipment have increased dramatically in the last 50 years. Larger and more efficient equipment decrease the amount of time it takes to harvest crops. Most fields are disked soon after harvest, covering most crop stubble early in the fall. There is very little winter cover left and crops get planted quickly in the spring. During the summer, 'recreational' or aesthetic mowing of roadsides and non-crop areas often occurs during prime nesting season (April – August) for the northern bobwhite, ring-necked pheasant and other grassland birds. The changes to the landscape and the loss of habitat have occurred slowly, over several decades, but the additive effects on quail and pheasant populations are dramatic.

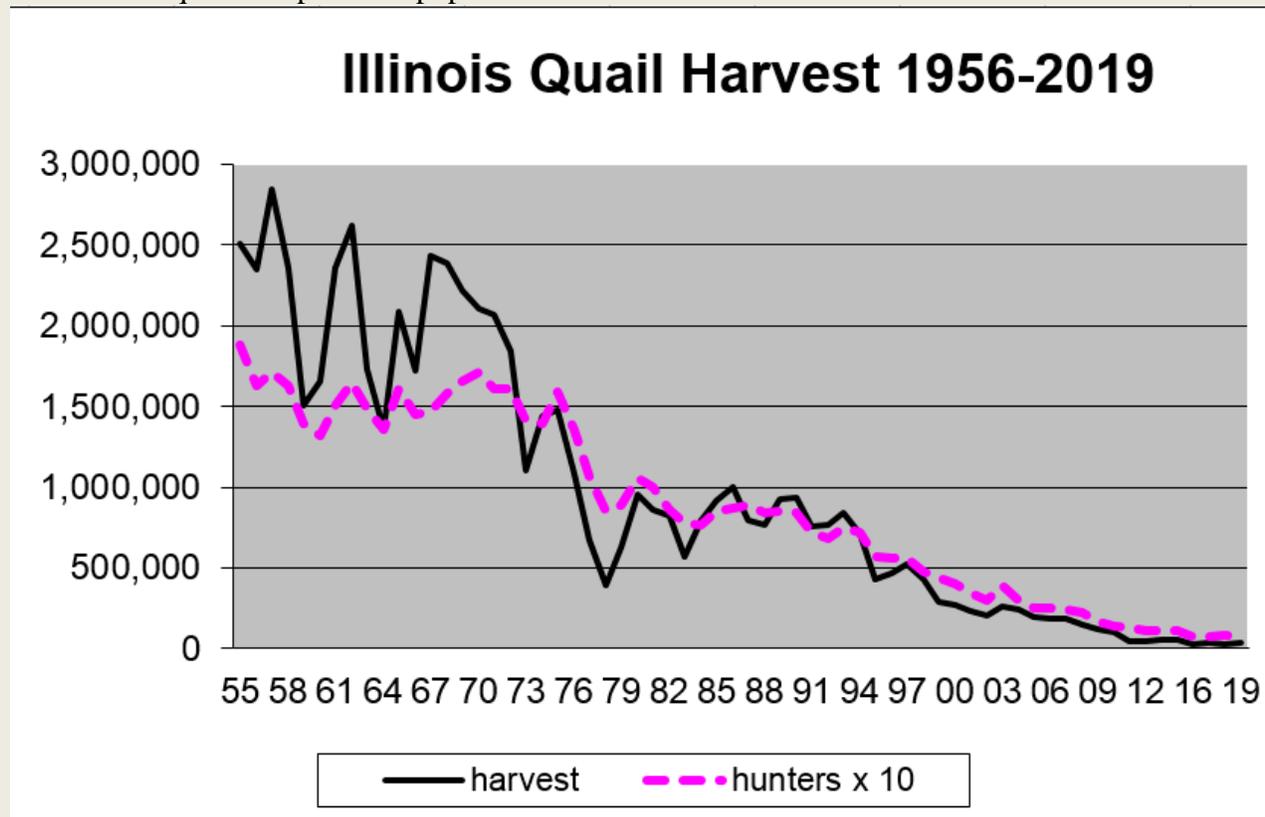


Figure 1. Illinois Quail Harvest and Quail Hunters 1955 – 2019.

2019-20 Hunter Harvest

The 2018-19 quail survey estimated that 6,995 hunters shot 35,490 wild quail (21% increase) compared to 8,597 hunters and 29,385 quail in the 2017-18 survey. The number of quail per hunter/day was up 27%. IDNR conducts annual bird surveys across the state to track trends for game birds and other grassland/shrubland birds.

Quail Population Index

There are established routes across the state and biologists run the routes two times annually during the spring/summer. The first run is completed during the peak breeding window for ring-necked pheasant (May 10 – June 10) and the second run is completed during the peak of quail breeding (June 10 – July 10). Each route has 20 stops, where biologists stop for 3 minutes and record individual birds seen or heard. The number of routes surveyed annually depends on staff availability, but as many of the surveys are completed as possible. Statewide, observers recorded an average of 0.38 quail per stop/route (Same as 2019) with quail occurring at 19% of the stops (11% increase from 2019) based on the 2nd run results.

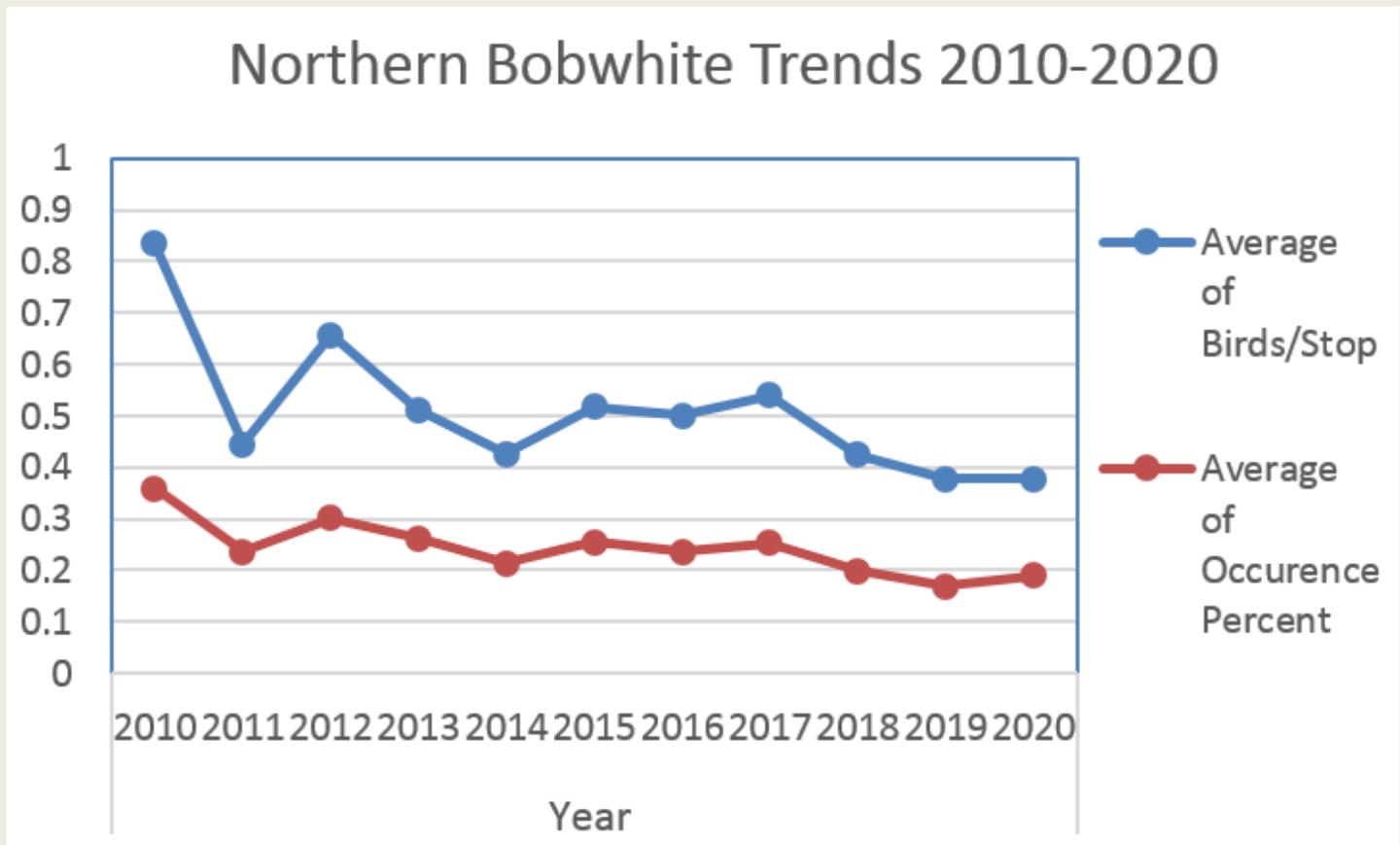


Figure 2. Northern Bobwhite trends for Birds per Stop and Percent Occurrence 2010-2020

Weather 2019-2020

The winter of 2019-2020 was relatively mild and winter mortality due to weather was likely low for quail. Spring brought above-average to record braking rainfall over a large portion of the State potentially impacting early nesting attempts. From late June through most of August, weather conditions improved across much of the state. Overall, 2020 weather conditions were good for quail during their peak nesting and brood-rearing season.

2020-2021 Season Outlook

The key to a successful 2020-21 quail season is finding high-quality habitat. Hunter harvest surveys in 2019-20 showed an increase in harvest with less hunters taking to the field. The most productive quail regions in the state this year seem to be Central and West-central Illinois. Quail numbers in southern Illinois are still struggling after several years of above average rains and a couple of late winter storms that brought ice and snow cover. Establishing quality quail habitat or managing existing habitat is more important than ever for the future of quail

and quail hunting.

Habitat Management Tips

- ‘Stone’s Throw’ escape cover – A good rule of thumb for evaluating the amount of escape cover in your quail management area is to think about how far you can throw a rock. You should be able to stand anywhere on the property and throw a rock into escape cover (blackberry brambles, shrub thickets, giant ragweed patches, etc.). If you can – well done! If not, then it’s probably not as good of quail habitat as it could be!
- Good quail habitat looks messy and “weedy”. Fields that look ‘clean’ with tall grasses dominating, are probably not good quail habitat!
- Break up mowing times to ensure some suitable escape cover for quail throughout the year. Try not mow more than 1/3 or 1/4 of any field, waterways or fallow areas at a time. Avoid mowing during peak nesting season, from May 1 – August 1. This strategy is also important to other grassland birds and wildlife including monarch butterflies and other pollinators.
- A general guideline for quail habitat is to provide 40% brood cover (flowering forbs and scattered grasses with open, bare dirt underneath), 30% nesting cover (unburned grasses with scattered forbs), 20% escape cover (thickets in and along the edges of grasslands that provide heavy cover, ie. blackberry, dogwood, giant ragweed, sumac, loose brush piles, etc.), 5% roosting cover (bare ground with sturdy, overhead cover) and 5% food plots (if there are no adjacent ag fields). These components must be provided in every 40 – 80 acre block of suitable habitat, since quail do not typically move very far from escape cover.
- October is a good time to spray and/or disc blocks (4 – 8 acres/year for every 40) in existing grasslands that have become too thick.
- Fall mowing or burning in September or early October can clear away thatch and stimulate vigorous regrowth of cool-season grasses that invade stands of native grasses. Once this new growth reaches 6” – 12” in the fall, read and follow label directions for a foliar application of herbicide like glyphosate to set back areas of tall fescue, brome, bluegrass or reed-canary grass. A second herbicide application may be needed the following spring/summer before native grasses begin growing.

For additional information on quail or quail management:

- Illinois Department of Natural Resources, **District Wildlife Biologists**
(<http://web.extension.illinois.edu/wildlife/professionals.cfm>)
- **Quail Forever**, habitat management tips
(<https://quailforever.org/Habitat/Why-Habitat/Quail-Facts/Upland-Habitat-Basics.aspx>)
- **National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative** (<http://bringbackbobwhites.org/>)
- Missouri Department of Conservation’s **Covey Headquarters Newsletter**
(<http://mdc.mo.gov/wildlife/attracting-wildlife/covey-headquarters-newsletter>)

Thank you for your interest in the northern bobwhite quail. Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season in 2020!

Season Dates Update

November 7, 2020 – January 8, 2021 (North)

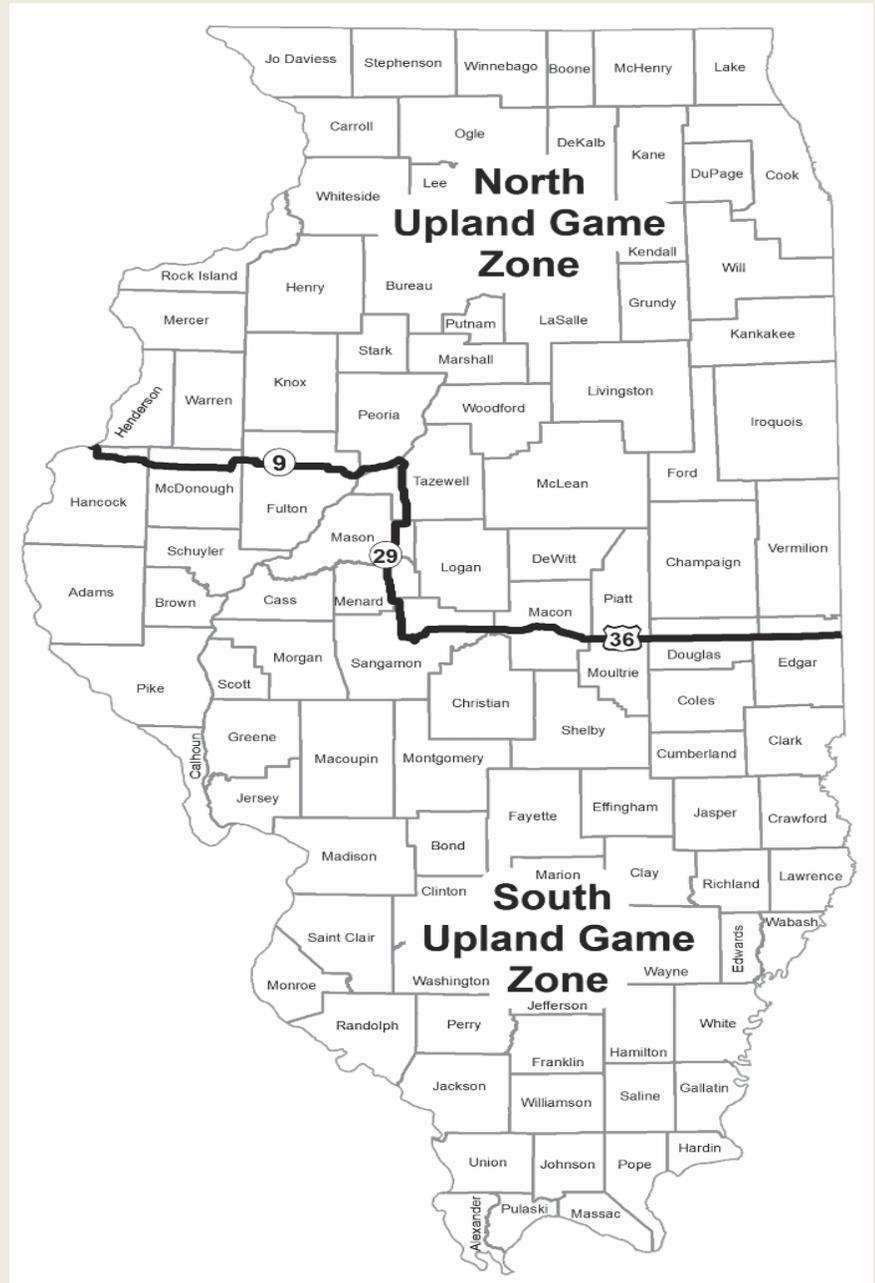
November 7, 2020 – January 15, 2021 (South)

Hours

Sunrise to Sunset

Bag Limits

8 per day with 20 in possession after the 3rd day



*Prepared by Bob Caveny 09/20
Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife Resources*

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