

# **2011 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. Large 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 quail abundance statewide and by each individual state region (Figure 1).

This marks the 22<sup>nd</sup> year that roadside quail surveys have been conducted in Oklahoma. The statewide index has declined from the 2010 survey results and is 81% below the 21-year average (Table 1). 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 habitat quantity and quality and quail nesting conditions. The 2011 statewide index decreased 37% from 2010. The only region where the number of quail observed increased from the 2010 survey was in the South-central region where quail numbers only slightly increased over 2010 numbers.

Weather plays a key role in quail production and this year the population is going to show it. Oklahoma had record heat and severe drought conditions throughout the nesting season, which was not favorable to the quail population. However, there were some areas throughout Oklahoma that did see some spotty showers that provided some brief relief from the extreme drought, allowing some nesting success and recruitment.

Western Oklahoma remains in the forefront when it comes to quail habitat in Oklahoma and will still typically have the best population of birds in the state. Weather in the western part of the state like most of the other regions was not favorable and affected habitat quantity and quality, resulting in greatly reduced reproductive success. With the lack of precipitation, new vegetative growth was reduced and ranchers had to use available vegetation to maintain livestock and some still had to reduce herd numbers. The combination of this and the extreme drought resulted in a lack of much needed nesting cover for quail and also limited brooding cover for young birds.

Central Oklahoma, just like other regions, didn't receive much precipitation until August which provided some much needed moisture and a short break from the heat. Some areas in the northwest also received some spotty showers that could have allowed for successful nesting that isn't reflected in survey results. The South-central region was the only area to show a survey increase and the only region to see any broods of young quail. With this region having areas scattered throughout that have quality quail habitat that can

provide the chance of a late season hatch, there should be opportunity for hunters to find quail and have some quality outings.

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, like the rest of the state had below average rainfall and long periods of high temperatures that had a negative effect on nesting attempts and success. This region of the state did begin receiving precipitation in August which provided some opportunity for successful late nesting which likely isn't reflected in survey results. 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 landowners and biologist in the field have been mixed but the true test of how well quail did this nesting season will come on November 12<sup>th</sup> 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	1990-2010 21-yr. Average	2010	2011
Statewide	6.3	1.9	1.2
Northwest	9.0	2.8	1.8
North-central	3.3	0.5	0.1
Northeast	3.6	1.8	0.5
Southwest	13.7	5.0	3.8
South-central	2.5	0.5	0.7
Southeast	6.2	1.3	0.5

Figure 1

**Regional boundaries for Oklahoma used for quail roadside surveys.**







