

# Northern Bobwhite Quail

## Key Takeaways

- Considered the state game bird of Tennessee, the Northern Bobwhite Quail feeds on seeds, insects, and small fruits, and its ideal habitat consists of native grasslands and areas of shrubs and thickets.
- Bobwhite quail have historically been abundant in Tennessee, but the population began its decline in Tennessee and around the US in the 1960s.
- Tennessee’s farmers and landowners have an opportunity to voluntarily participate in the improvement of the Northern Bobwhite Quail population.
- TWRA and the Tennessee Fish and Wildlife Commission (TFWC) have made re-establishing the Northern Bobwhite Quail in Tennessee a priority.
- Tennessee has over 4 million acres considered to have high potential for bobwhite quail habitat, with another 8.2 million acres with moderate potential.

## Questions

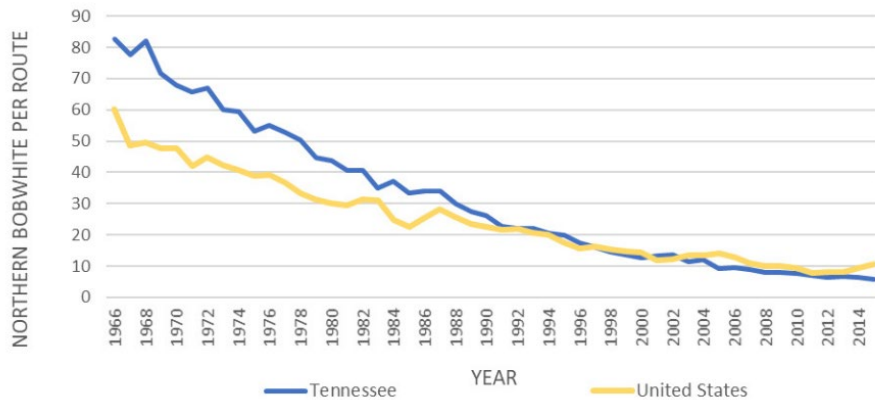
1. Do farmers in your community participate in the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife program?
2. Would your county Farm Bureau like more information on the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife program?

## Background

*Colinus virginianus*, better known as Northern Bobwhite Quail or bobwhite quail, is a small ground-dwelling bird found across the eastern US, including Tennessee. **Considered the state game bird of Tennessee, the Northern Bobwhite feeds on seeds, insects, and small fruits, and its ideal habitat consists of native grasslands and areas of shrubs and thickets.**

**Bobwhite quail have historically been abundant in Tennessee, but the population began its decline in the state and around the US in the 1960s.** According to *Partners in Flight*, a group of 150 organizations who focus on land bird conservation, the Northern Bobwhite is one of 24 bird species considered to be “Common Birds in Steep Decline.” Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency (TWRA) also identifies the Northern Bobwhite Quail as a “Species of Greatest Conservation Need,” according to the 2015 Tennessee State Wildlife Action Plan Team. Many different factors have been said to contribute to this decline, including increased predation and a decrease in the bobwhite quail’s natural habitat by residential development, fire suppression, and even the increase in production agriculture in some areas during that time.

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**Tennessee’s farmers and landowners have an opportunity to voluntarily participate in the improvement of the Northern Bobwhite Quail population.** According to a Wildlife Society study, “creating early successional vegetation on working farms can increase northern bobwhite quail abundance with little reduction in crop production.” Farmers can use lower-yielding areas of their land for Northern Bobwhite Quail habitats by making relatively small management changes and utilizing existing conservation programs, all while improving wildlife habitat, building soil health, and increasing water quality.

Multiple Conservation Reserve Programs (CRPs) at USDA aim to improve habitats for bobwhite quail, including State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE), Bobwhite Habitat Restoration (CP38E), and Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds (CP33). These programs provide incentives to landowners to make enhancements to their land which would be suitable for many different conservation goals, including reestablishing bobwhite quail habitats.

Along with USDA’s efforts, **TWRA and the Tennessee Fish and Wildlife Commission (TFWC) have made re-establishing the Northern Bobwhite Quail in Tennessee a priority.** In 2013, TWRA designated four Quail Focus Areas (QFAs) across the state for dedicated ideal quail habitats. These locations include Bark Camp Barrens in Coffee County, Bridgestone/Firestone in White County, Lick Creek in Greene County, and Wolf River in Fayette County. In addition, Kyker Bottoms Refuge in Blount County was deemed a Quail Development Area (QDA). With the inception of these areas, TWRA has been able to closely monitor and document multiple different trends to better understand bobwhite quail and their habitat. This information helped TWRA and TFWC create a five-year strategic plan called

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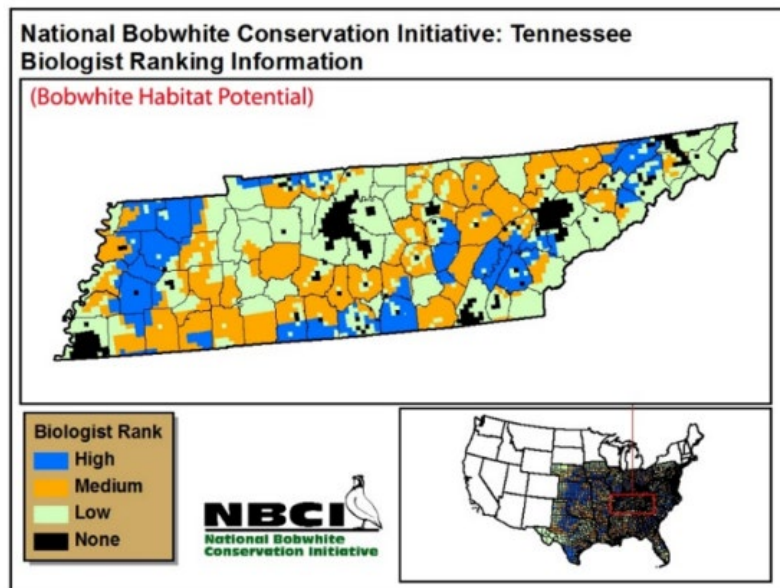
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the "Northern Bobwhite Management Plan in Tennessee." This plan consists of historical data of the Northern Bobwhite Quail in TN, core objectives for the integrity of the species and time-stamped strategies for how those objectives are to be implemented from 2021-2026.

Some of these strategies include:

- Identify lands, particularly in QFAs, not managed by TWRA but contain high-value actual and/or potential Northern Bobwhite Quail habitat.
- Encourage and incentivize the use of Best Management Practices on lands, particularly in QFAs, not managed by TWRA but contain high-value actual and/or potential Northern Bobwhite Quail habitat.
- Convert a minimum of 1,200 acres per TWRA Region annually of forested lands to early successional plant communities with combined timber harvest and prescribed burn projects.
- Develop an effective outreach program to identify agricultural producers and other landowners in QFAs and directly contact to educate and engage in Northern Bobwhite management and conservation.
- Expand inventory and monitoring activities to areas outside of QFAs and QDAs as funding allows.

Access the Northern Bobwhite Management Plan in Tennessee here:



To better understand the prime areas for bobwhite quail habitats, the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI) created a county-by-county map depicting High, Medium, and Low rankings for potential bobwhite quail habitat conversion. According to the following map erected in the early 2000s,

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However, efforts to increase Northern Bobwhite quail habitat acreage in QFA's have garnered some attention. Since deforestation is required in some cases to achieve the habitat suitable for the Northern Bobwhite Quail, these efforts have received some negative attention from the public. For example, according to an article by the *Tennessee Lookout*, information was leaked in the summer of 2021 indicating TWRA's desire to clear at least 1,000 acres of forest land in the Bridgestone-Firestone Wildlife Management Area, and the result was public disdain. Issues such as potential erosion into the Caney Fork River, negative effects on tourism, and others were shared.