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MDC Predicts Quail Season to be Good

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MDC predicts quail season to be good in parts of state
Quail production for 2018 below 10-year average, but good hunting can still be found.

Missouri - With quail-hunting season starting Nov. 1, the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) advises hunters that overall quail production was about the same as last year, but below the 10-year average. MDC staff note that good hunting can be found in areas with quality habitat in north and west-central portions of the state.

Each August, MDC conservation agents record the numbers of quail they see while driving a 30-mile route – called the roadside index. A total of 110 routes are completed around the state. These numbers are then tallied and grouped by eight geographic areas of quail production – called zoogeographic regions. (SEE RELATED MAP)

According to MDC, this year's statewide average roadside index of 1.7 birds is the same as last year's and 15% below the previous 10-year average. Regionally, the roadside index ranged from 0 in the Northern and Eastern Ozark Border to 5.3 in the Northwest Prairie.

MDC Small Game Coordinator David Hoover points out that, although statewide production was down, three regions showed counts at or above last year's values.

According to Hoover, the Northwestern Prairie region is up 3.5% from last year and 42% over the 10-year average while the Northeast Riverbreaks region is unchanged from last year but still 12% above the 10-year average. The Western Prairie region had the greatest

increase from last year at nearly 47% but is still 48% below the 10-year average. The Northern Riverbreaks region was down 26% from last year but is still 23% above the 10-year average.

“Having quality habitat is the most important factor for quail production, but weather also plays a very important, and often unpredictable, role,” said Hoover. “This year’s quail production highlighted this complicated relationship between habitat and weather. The drier-than-normal conditions this summer likely benefited quail in many areas with good habitat, while being of little or no benefit to those quail in areas with marginal to poor habitat.”

He added that it is no secret quail populations are much lower than they once were, but habitat conditions are also much different than 50 years ago when quail numbers were at their peak.

“Continued loss of habitat puts additional stress on the remaining quail populations, which are often isolated in islands of habitat, and thus more susceptible to the negative effects of weather and predation,” Hoover said.

He added that the quail community still has much to learn about factors affecting quail production and survival.

“Missouri biologists have recently completed a study in the southwestern portion of the state that has the potential to change how we approach quail management in the future,” said Hoover. “This study is examining how specific habitat management approaches affect quail nesting rates and success as well as brood habitat use and survival. This research, combined with other studies recently published from around the quail range, are shedding light on just how crucial the summer months are for quail populations, and how best to manage for the most favorable conditions.”

More on the roadside survey

MDC Resource Scientist Beth Emmerich manages the August roadside survey, which has been conducted since 1983.

“It represents the best way we have to track quail populations on a statewide basis,” Emmerich said. “The survey does a good job of tracking large-scale population changes and is a good barometer for how more localized populations may also be doing from year to year.”

She added, that since 2013, quail populations in areas of good habitat have experienced relatively good production years.

“In 2015, we saw the highest statewide roadside index in nearly a decade,” Emmerich explained. “That summer was extremely wet, resulting in many crop fields in northern Missouri left unplanted, and many of which developed diverse annual plant cover that persisted well into August. This abundance of good brood cover led to a very good production year for quail, despite the abnormally wet summer conditions.”

Fall hunting prospects

“In northern and west-central portions of the state, hunters should expect bird numbers at or above last year in areas with good habitat,” said Hoover. “Look for large areas of diverse native grass cover intermixed with lots of low-growing woody cover and untilled crop fields and you are likely to find a covey.”

Hunting season for quail is Nov. 1 through Jan. 15, 2019. The daily bag limit is eight with a possession limit of 16. Get more information from MDC online at huntfish.mdc.mo.gov/hunting-trapping/species/quail, or from MDC’s 2018 Missouri Hunting and Trapping Regulations booklet, available where permits are sold.

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