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# Improved habitat management helping to increase quail population

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Published: Friday, July 24, 2009 8:25 PM CDT

ST. PAUL -- For the 19 years Pete Berthelsen has lived in Nebraska, he has never seen as many quail as he has seen this year.

Berthelsen, who lives in Elba, is senior field coordinator for Pheasants Forever in Nebraska.

And the increased quail numbers in Nebraska are bucking an alarming trend of the decline of northern bobwhite quail nationwide, according to the National Audubon Society, which said that since 1967, quail numbers nationwide have declined 82 percent.

The quail comeback in Nebraska, according to Berthelsen, is due to a unique partnership between private landowners, conservation groups, such as Pheasants Forever and Quail Forever, and state and federal wildlife officials, who have joined forces to improve quail habitat in Nebraska.

On Friday, Berthelsen hosted a quail management and wildflowers tour on property he and his wife, Laura, own north of St. Paul.

Among the colorful fields of big blue stem, false sunflowers, bergamots, black-eyed Susans, gray-headed cones, purple cones and many other varieties of wildflowers, grasses, forbs and weeds, Berthelsen explained the techniques he is using to manage the land.

The 160-acre plot is 95 acres of native prairie and 65 acres of land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program. The CRP land is planted to a diverse mix of prairie plants. Altogether, there are more than 170 varieties of wildflowers planted on the Berthelsens' property.

Berthelsen intensely manages the land to maintain its diverse floralscape, not allowing invasive species such as cedar trees and brome grass to push out or dominate the plant diversity.

A number of management practices, such as prescribed burns and intensive, short-term grazing, have allowed Berthelsen to return the landscape to its state before the pioneer settlers began homesteading the land.

He has also planted a number of plum thickets throughout the property, and along with other habitat improvements that have created a home for 15 coveys of quail on his land. Along with quail, the land provides important habitat for other upland game birds, such as sharp-tailed grouse, prairie chickens and pheasants. There



Ben Rutten of Basset, from the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission(right), and Sara Fulton of Norfolk, Farm Bill biologist for Pheasants Forever, were among more than 20 people participating in the quail management and wildflowers tour sponsored by Pheasants Forever north of St. Paul Friday. (Independent/Robert Pore)

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is also an occasional rafter of turkeys wandering around the property.

The plum thickets provide the vertical cover quails need to establish their coveys. Also, the land beneath the thickets should be bare, especially of the cool-season, perennial bromegrass. Along with the cover the thickets provide, there is also a variety of plants and the access to open space that provides the vital winter cover needed by the birds, which generally never stray more than 50 yards from their nesting area.

"Especially for quail, there are a lots of things that can be done with what somebody has on their property," Berthelsen said. "Lots of times people think if they want more pheasants or quail that they have to go out and plant things and have to do a big project."

Berthelsen said a landowner can do a lot of things in a very small area and have an immediate impact. He has a term for it, too: dehydrated quail. "Add habitat and, poof, you have quail, especially in Central Nebraska."

Berthelsen attributes the increase in quail numbers in Central Nebraska to several factors. First, recent winters have been "fairly mild and nothing extreme."

"If you have good habitat, you are going to have a lot of wildlife around," he said. "Quail, in particular, can respond quicker than pheasants."

Berthelsen said without the help of private landowners, upland birds, such as quail and pheasants, would have little chance of surviving in Nebraska.

"Ninety-seven percent of Nebraska land is in private ownership and if you want to do anything for wildlife it is all done on private land," he said.

Along with the motivation of having more wildlife on their property, Berthelsen said there are a variety of U.S. Department of Agriculture and state programs landowners can use to increase wildlife habitat on their property, such as CRP and EQIP.

"They can actually make the decision to have wildlife habitat and not impact the bottom line," he said.

Improving habitat for quail has a beneficial multiplying effect for other wildlife varieties as well. It is also a form of rural economic development as improved upland game numbers can bring hunters, and that will benefit small rural communities such as St. Paul.

"A small community like St. Paul can tell all about the tradition of opening weekend of pheasant and quail season when you couldn't get a motel room, there were hunter breakfasts and those sorts of things," Berthelsen said.

Quail populations are also a barometer for the health of the environment, he said. He likened declining quail population as sort of a "canary in the mine" indicator about the overall health of the ecosystem and the fauna it supports.

"If quail numbers are going down, that is my indicator that pheasants, grassland songbirds and other things are probably not very far behind," Berthelsen said. "If quail numbers are going down, then everything else is going to be another year or two before going down."

To help support the rebuilding of quail habitat, Berthelsen said, the Central Nebraska Quail Forever Chapter was started in June and will hold its first fundraising banquet in November. It is the fourth Quail Forever chapter in Nebraska. There are 61 Pheasants Forever chapters in the state.

For more information about the Central Nebraska Quail Forever Chapter or information on how to improve quail habitat on your property, contact Berthelsen at (308) 754-5339 or e-mail him at [pberthelsen@pheasantsforever.org](mailto:pberthelsen@pheasantsforever.org)

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