

# Quail Management Considerations

Where wildlife management is concerned, pheasants would be considered a “generalist species” that can both thrive in a wide variety of habitat types and pick up and move to different habitat types throughout the year. Quail, on the other hand, are a “specialist species” that requires very specific habitat types and needs to survive.

If you stop and think about the areas where you typically find quail coveys, they are likely located at or near abandoned farmsteads, weedy areas, crop fields with brushy fence lines and along riparian areas are probably on your list.

In fact, if quail do have a central focal point with very specific habitat components, you won't have quail. Quality quail habitat is comprised of three key components that consist of: a Covey Headquarters, a diverse mix of grasses and forbs and an area with bare ground.

**Covey Headquarters:** This is probably the most important of the three habitat components and is an area with shrubby cover like what you find in a large plum thicket. The size of a Covey Headquarter should be at least 1,500 ft<sup>2</sup> and provide vertical structure that is 3' to 5' tall. In some cases, tall, weedy patches can provide this type of cover and should remain unmowed throughout the year. This habitat component should not be located with trees as this can provide predator perches.

A Covey Headquarters can be created by planting shrubs like American plum, chokecherry, sand cherry, buffaloberry, etc. Basically, any shrub that will grow to 3' to 5' in height, become so thick you can't walk through it, have bare ground within the thicket and get to a size of 1,500 ft<sup>2</sup> or larger.

**Diverse Mix of Grasses and Forbs:** This area will serve as the nesting and brood-rearing cover and should be comprised of less than 50% grass, greater than 50% forbs and have plenty of open areas on the ground. Some of the plant species that could be included in a mixture include Little Bluestem, Sideoats Grama, Illinois Bundleflower, Showy Partridgepea, Leadplant, False Sunflower, Coneflower species, Milkvetch species, etc.

The key here is to design a diverse mixture that will not become established to grass cover too quickly and retain a high percentage of forbs (broad-leaved plants) in the cover. If the area becomes established to grasses too quickly, it will tend to fill in and be too thick for quail chicks to make their way through it.

**Bare Ground:** The rule of thumb for quail management is that they require their habitat to have about 50% bare ground. This habitat component can be provided through the use of food plots, row crops or light disking. By strategically placing the Covey Headquarters and grassy areas with food plots, a complete package for a quail covey can easily be designed and managed in the future.

**Location Requirements:** For the most part, these three habitat components need to be immediately next to and touching each other to work. In order to create and provide quality quail habitat, coveys require all of these habitat components to be located within 50 yards of each other. In winter in the Midwest, coveys rarely travel more than about 100' throughout the entire winter. If they need to travel further to

meet their food and cover needs the increased exposure to predators and the elements will lower their survival.

One of the ways to help design quality habitat is by establishing a type of project where as many of the required habitat components are provided in one setting as possible. One way of meeting this goal is to plant a PF or QF endorsed winter cover/food plot mixture. These mixtures are specifically designed by biologists to provide excellent winter cover with a stable, high energy food source in it. The management goal here is to place the “kitchen” and the “bedroom” in the same location. A PF/QF winter cover mix will provide a winter food source, quality winter cover, areas of bare ground throughout the year and brood-rearing cover. If half of each winter cover plot is allowed to remain fallow and undisturbed the second year, it can also provide excellent nesting cover.

Designing winter cover plots that rotate between planting 50% new and leaving 50% fallow each year will provide many of the habitat components a quail covey needs to thrive. When located adjacent to a large plum thicket, you may have just created the perfect quail habitat for your property.

The last important key to remember is that weeds are a good thing! If you allow tall, weedy areas to remain undisturbed, you may be providing some of the best quail habitat you could design and plant. Some of these annual weeds that provide great quail habitat include kochia, ragweed, sunflowers, mare’s tail, goldenrod, buckbrush, lambs quarters, velvet weed, etc. Any annual weeds that provide tall (vertical) cover while still providing about 50% bare ground have a great chance of producing quality quail habitat.

For specific quail management and habitat mixture recommendations for your area, contact a PF and QF biologist.



Quality quail habitat needs to be comprised of three habitat components located immediately next to each other: large thickets of shrubby cover, areas of bare soil provided by food plots, crops or light disking and a grass and forb mix. This Nebraska location shows ideal quail habitat in a combination where