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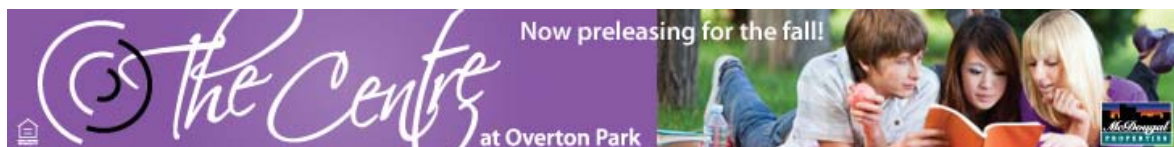


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## Researchers receive grant to find cause of quail decline

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Posted: Tuesday, July 5, 2011 3:59 pm

Caitlan Osborn Staff Writer | 0 comments

Toxicologists for Texas Tech's Institute of Environmental and Human Health were recently awarded \$846,000 to uncover the reason behind the drastically declining quail population in the Texas Rolling Plains and Southern High Plains regions over the next three years.

The money is part of \$1.97 million distributed to the Rolling Plains Quail Research Foundation, which is made up of lab groups at Tech, Texas A&M at College Station and Kingsville, as well as universities in Oklahoma.

Ron Kendall, director for the TIEHH, said the quail population began a huge decline late last summer and early last fall and that the numbers continue to drop.

The population decrease could be caused by a variety of factors including parasites, pesticides or heavy metal contaminants, he said.

The situation is a paradox, he said, because last year's rainfall was particularly high. High moisture rates usually equal a large quail population, but that was not the case last year.

"If you look at our rainfall last year, theoretically we should be having a great quail year," Kendall said, "but there was a very dramatic decline instead. This is a pretty serious issue considering that the quail population may have dropped as much as 80 to 90 percent."

Tech toxicologists are working on three research projects concentrating on different causes for Texas quail decline, Kendall said. Tech will be the central receiving station for quail samples that will later be sent to participating colleges who will look for a number of parasites and other contaminants in the samples.

Steve Presley, leader of the receiving lab, said the quail population in the Rolling Plains and Southern High Plains had been decreasing steadily for 25 to 30 years before this larger fall occurred.

"Nobody can really determine what's causing it," he said. "People have talked drought, or lack of food, or habit loss or even predators, but nobody's seriously looked at parasites and diseases."

The two species researchers are taking a particular interest in, Presley said, are the bobwhite quail and the scaled quail.

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According to the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department's quail forecast for 2011, the average number of bobwhites observed per route in the Rolling Plains was 8.0 compared to 6.6 last year and the average number of scaled quail observed per route was 7.2 compared to 16.9 last year.

"This is well below the long term mean of 21.5 (in bobwhites) and 17.5 (in scaled quail)," the TPWD website stated.

Presley said his research group will focus on arboviruses like West Nile virus, Encephalitis and Q fever, pathogens that usually occur in nature, but can be transmitted to humans. To complete the cycle, the disease must be transmitted from the birds to mosquitoes to make it a threat to humans.

"Particularly West Nile virus and St. Louis Encephalitis majorly exist in a mosquito-bird cycle and quail have never been shown to be the primary reservoirs," he said, "but last year we detected West Nile virus in the bobwhite quail and the blue scale quail. However, they may just be infected and it may not make them sick, so they may not be able to transmit it to mosquitoes to complete the cycle."

His hypothesis is that it is a combination of factors that are influencing the decline, Presley said, and this year's drought combined with other problems could make the effects worse.

"Because of the drought we don't have the amount of insects for the baby quail to eat, so they're not getting adequate nutrition," he said. "You may have weather stress, nutritional stress and then a disease stress comes along and it's just too heavy of a burden."

Besides a change in the food web, Kendall said the quail decline has had a negative impact on small communities that depend on hunters for their economy.

"It's a huge economic business in small communities like Spur or Dickens or Crosbyton," he said. "When people come to hunt quail they spend money, so if you're a small town, that's important to you. In addition, a large part of the rural land value out here in west Texas is not driven by cattle, it's driven by wildlife."

Kendall said once toxicologists find the cause for this environmental anomaly, they will work to create a solution to rebuild the quail population and to prevent other animals from being affected in the future.

"This is an example of an emerging disease and/or contaminant issue that will continue to threaten our wildlife," he said, "and that's why the work that we're doing is so important now because we do know that there will be other diseases coming in the future that we need to be ready for."

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