

# Best Management Practices for Quail

## Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative

### Northern Bobwhite Quail & Their Future

Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) quail populations in Virginia have fallen, in large part due to habitat fragmentation, changes to existing habitat, and increased intensity of land management and farming techniques. It is therefore critical to assess land management practices, especially on private lands, to evaluate how they are impacting quail habitat. If ample and suitable habitat is available, and if weather is favorable, quail populations are likely to rebound. Ultimately, the fate of quail populations will be determined by the management practices of private landowners and their willingness to work together across property lines.

Keep in mind that current quail populations are small and fragmented. It may take time for them to re-establish in areas where they currently are not found but habitat restoration has occurred. In the meantime, rest assured that quail habitat is benefitting a myriad of other bird and wildlife species, which is a big conservation success.

Illustrations  
by Nick Garnhart, VWL



### Managing for Quail Habitat

In the last 50 years, land management practices have steered in the direction of mass production agriculture, loss of native grasslands in favor of non-native cool season grasses, and “aesthetically” pleasing landscaping. However, these modified landscapes do not provide shelter, food, and nesting habitat for many species, including quail.

There are a myriad of different land management practices for all types of land uses that will help to support the rejuvenation of quail populations in Virginia. Listed below are a suite of recommendations for managing habitat to support quail, several of which are also illustrated on the following page.

1

Create corridors of vegetated cover that quail can move along without exposing themselves to predators. Corridors can come in the form of vegetated fencerows and field borders, thickets, riparian and upland buffers, and hedgerows.

2

For landowners with fallow fields, fields of native warm season grasses, or wildflower meadows, consider planting “islands” of thickets, with each island being at least 50 feet in diameter and with distance between islands no farther than 150 feet. These islands encourage quail to use an entire field rather than just the edges. Take advantage of rocky outcrops or poor drainage areas, where haying or managing is already challenging, to build out these thickets.

3

Hinge cuts (or edge feathering) turn edge trees into a shrubby environment, creating a better transitional habitat area. This provides a gradient in the hedgerow profile, offering the most adequate protection for quail. You can also achieve this effect by planting native shrubs and woody plants on tree lines, or allowing them to grow naturally.

4

Plant native warm season grasses, native trees, and native forbs to provide food, shelter, and nesting habitat for quail. You can find more information about native plants in our resource “Native Plantings for Quail.”



5

Reduce the amount of mowing, clipping, and bushhogging that is undertaken on your landscape, and avoid cutting fields between May and August when quail are nesting.

6

When cutting or mowing, do so in patches: divide a field into thirds, and mow one of those thirds each year, so habitat always persists while you’re still able to keep succession at bay. Also, be sure to raise your cutting blade to 8 inches—or as high as it will go—to reduce both ground nesting bird and turtle mortality, while ensuring faster regeneration of habitat.



7

Prescribed burning can promote the regeneration of good quail habitat. Consult your local Department of Forestry (DOF) or NRCS agent to learn more about burning as an option for your landscape.

8

Remove feral domestic cats from your landscape. Quail are ground-nesting birds and cats are extremely efficient ground-hunting predators!





Illustration depicting ways to incorporate best management practices for quail into existing fields and pastures. “Islands” and hedgerows are emphasized.

