

SOUTH-OF-THE- BORDER BOBS

Hunters who have never shot wild bobwhites are often amazed at how fast the birds are.

The thrill of wild quail with El Dorado Outfitters

text & photos by Gary Kramer



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The bobwhite quail, or northern bobwhite, is found in all or part of 40 states, one Canadian province and portions of Mexico, making it the most common of the six species of quail in North America. From New England south to Florida, west to Texas and Mexico, and then north to Colorado and Minnesota, the clear *bob-white* call was once a common spring sound. While bobwhites are still locally common and number in the millions, their populations have declined for at least the past 50 years. Habitat destruction accelerated by clean farming practices, heavy use of agrochemicals, urban expansion and the increased frequency of drought due to climate change have all been factors in the decline.

From a hunting perspective, the decline has significantly reduced or eliminated wild-bobwhite hunting in many areas of the country. Yet in the face of this decline, there are still places where hard-charging pointing dogs, explosive covey rises and fast-flying birds are the order of the day. Although there are pockets of wild birds through-

out their range, the best bobwhite numbers today occur in Texas, southwest Oklahoma, a couple of places in Missouri and Mexico.

Through the years I have hunted all six species of quail, but it had been at least a decade since I'd hunted wild bobwhites. Which is why as I was strolling the aisles at the 2023 Safari Club Convention, in Nashville, one booth caught my eye. The banner over it proclaimed: "World Class Wild Bobwhite Hunting in Mexico." I immediately walked over to talk to the person standing in front of the booth. To my surprise, it was Paul Anderson, whom I knew from Detail Company Adventures, where previously he had been a sales representative. After the initial greeting, Paul introduced me to his business partner, Jose Aleman, and then I wasted no time telling them that I was interested in arranging a bobwhite hunt with their El Dorado Outfitters. I learned that they had just finished their first year of operation and that the 2023-'24 season would be their second. I booked a hunt for January '24.

The base of operations is Hacienda San Vicente, in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas—about 150 miles south of Harlingen, Texas. The lodge was built in the early 1980s by a Texas oil tycoon and is on the shores of Lake Guerrero about 10 miles south of the village of Jimenez. While the lodge sits on 400 acres, El Dorado Outfitters has leased or has access to 350,000 acres of prime quail habitat.

The reason for the abundance of bobwhites is the habitat: a combination of mesquite grassland; brushy hedge-



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English cockers are used to flush birds and then retrieve any that hunters manage to scratch down.



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rows; abandoned farm fields that have been taken over by native seed-producing plants; and scattered farming areas devoted to grain crops, including sorghum, wheat and corn. The mixture of abundant food, quality escape cover and excellent breeding habitat has generated what arguably may be the best wild-bobwhite hunting in North America.

It was about a year later that my hunting buddy Alan Sands and I flew from California to Harlingen. As is customary with all clients, we were met at the airport, and within 30 minutes we were at the Mexican border, where we showed our passports and were issued visas. The process was easy, and soon we were heading south on Highway 101. Along the way I asked Paul more about the operation. He told me that the lodge has 16 dogs—mostly pointers and five English cockers for flushing and retrieving. Hunters are transported to the field in Texas-style quail rigs complete with top-ride seats and multiple dog kennels. The drives from the lodge to the hunting areas vary from 30 minutes to more than an hour.

We arrived just before dinner, and after a welcome shot of Don Julio Añejo tequila, we sat down to a meal of locally caught *langostinos*, which looked like jumbo tiger prawns but were actually giant crayfish from Lake Guerrero. The *langostinos* were accompanied by fresh salads, beans, rice and homemade corn tortillas. We went to bed full and tired from the trip but eager for our first morning in the field.

The wake-up call came early, but I jumped out of bed ready to go. After a hearty breakfast of *huevos rancheros* and coffee, we climbed into the quail rig and headed out. Forty-five minutes later we pulled off the pavement onto a dusty dirt road and ended up at an abandoned orange grove next to a weedy farm field. It didn't take long for us to grab our shotguns and gear and for Jose, our guide that day, to put two pointers on the ground. The temperature was in the mid-50s, and there was a hint of morning dew and a slight breeze—great scenting conditions for the dogs.

We followed the pointers as the first rays of sunlight were fighting to break through the clouds. Only 10 minutes from the vehicle one of the dogs locked up. Soon the second came into view backing the first. As we approached, Alan was a bit ahead of me and to the right when a dozen bobwhites burst into the air. Alan shouldered his gun, picked a bird and dropped it before I could even find a target. His second shot and my first were almost simultaneous, and though I scratched down a bird, Alan blew a hole in the air. The pointers made the retrieves, and we were off to a good start.

The next point came on the edge of a sorghum field where both dogs locked up 20 yards apart. I headed for



El Dorado Outfitters co-owner Jose Aleman returns to the blind with a brace of black-bellied whistling ducks.

one pointer and Alan the other. Before we could reach the dogs, however, 10 bobwhites flushed between them. Half of the covey headed my way and the other half toward Alan. I missed with my first shot but managed to drop a bird on the edge of the group. I heard Alan fire twice, but when I looked over at him, he simply said, “Damn.”

Six coveys in the first two hours yielded a number of dead birds as well as numerous misses. It was a lesson in just how fast wild birds are and how difficult they can be to put in the bag. According to Paul, lots of people who have

hunted preserve bobwhites but never pursued wild bobs are amazed by the difference. As a result, the average number of birds taken per covey by a pair of decent shots is two. This is part of the reason the coveys are never overshot—that and the fact that if a covey is hit a bit hard, it will not be hunted for the rest of the season. Having 350,000 acres available affords this luxury and ensures abundant birds for the following year.

Even if it didn’t have incredible hunting, El Dorado’s lodge would make this a world-class destination. The place

has 11 rooms that are booked as single occupancy. Each room has an ensuite bathroom, a king-size bed and a bay window that looks out onto a well-manicured lawn, lush vegetation and Lake Guerrero in the background. A maximum of eight hunters at a time can be accommodated during quail season, with the two quail rigs holding up to four hunters each.

After the first morning we returned to the lodge for lunch, which was a Mexican feast of tacos, *chile relLENos*, tamales and a cold *cerveza*. Lunch was followed by a siesta, and around 3 PM we hit the road for the afternoon excursion.

This time the drive was just less than an hour, and we parked near a grassy field. A German shorthair and an English setter were put on the ground along with one of the cockers to flush and retrieve. Of the five coveys located that afternoon, the most memorable was at the end of the day. One of the dogs went on point in a patch of tall grass and brush, and the second moved in to back. As we approached, a pair of quail catapulted into the air. Alan picked one bird and dropped it, while I caught up with the other and dropped it. Seconds later the balance of the covey flushed. With good fortune on our side, we each managed another bird, making the sequence the best display of marksmanship of the day. So with four more birds in the bag and 11 covey rises for the day, we called it good and headed back to the lodge.

In addition to quail hunting, El Dorado offers duck hunting on Lake Guerrero and local ponds, mourning dove hunting during the winter, high-volume white-winged and mourning dove hunting in August and September, and large-mouth bass fishing on Lake Guerrero.

The next morning we decided to hunt ducks on a freshwater pond that was being frequented by black-bellied whistling ducks, shovelers and green- and blue-winged teal. After a 15-minute drive, we walked a couple hundred yards in the dark to a small wetland surrounded by dense brush. As we approached, at least two dozen ducks that had been roosting there flushed. Jose tossed out a dozen teal decoys, and we fashioned a blind from the local vegetation. Just before sunrise, a trio of teal buzzed the decoys, appearing so fast that we never fired. Soon a pair of shovelers decoyed perfectly, and we dropped both. Then a single teal streaked into range followed by more shovelers. While shovelers and teal dominated the bag, the highlight of the morning was several flocks of whistling ducks that approached. Whistling ducks seldom decoy but often will return to a particular pond for a day roost after feeding at night. Apparently, the pond we were hunting was the day roost they’d been using. On three occasions 20 to 30 whistling ducks pitched in and provided stellar shooting. The morning yielded a dozen ducks for each of us, and we returned to the lodge in good spirits.

SEASONS & SAFETY

The quail season in Tamaulipas is November 1 through February 28, with the best action after the weather cools, beginning in mid-December. Limits are 10 quail for each morning and afternoon hunt. The duck season coincides with quail season, with the bag generally between 10 and 15 birds per hunter for a morning excursion. White-winged doves are available from mid-August to the end of September, while mourning doves are present from mid-August to the end of the season in February. Dove hunters generally shoot six to eight boxes of shells per outing. Hunters can import their own shotguns for a \$430 fee, while use of the lodge’s guns is included as part of the trip package.

When it comes to hunting in Mexico, the elephant in the room is safety. In the case of El Dorado Outfitters, hunters are picked up in Texas and transferred to the lodge during daylight hours. Paul Anderson reports that there have been no safety issues. Similarly, there have been no incidents in the field; in fact, the local farmers welcome hunters and the lease fees they generate. By and large, the safety issues in Mexico are associated with the drug cartels, which have “more important business” than messing with tourists. Certainly there are exceptions, but I have no qualms about traveling to Mexico, which I have been doing regularly for more than 45 years. —G.K.

El Dorado also offers duck hunting on Lake Guerrero, where several boat-accessed blinds are in place for the season. The bag on the big lake is typically a mixture of lesser scaup (bluebills), pintails, wigeon, gadwalls and teal.

After the first day chasing quail and the excellent duck hunt, we concentrated on bobwhites for the final two days. The action was solid, and we moved 10 to 14 coveys each day. Our shooting improved, as well, and we added a bunch of birds to the bag. After the four days of quality hunting—all while enjoying excellent food, top-notch accommodations and good company—we headed back to Harlingen and the flight home. Thinking more about the trip and all that we saw and experienced, all I can say is that if you’re interest in quality hunting for wild quail, ducks or doves without hearing another shot or seeing another hunter, then book a trip with El Dorado Outfitters and you will not be disappointed. ➔

For more information on hunting in Mexico, contact El Dorado Outfitters, eldoradooutfittersmx.com.

Gary Kramer is an Editor at Large for *Shooting Sportsman*. His most recent book, *Waterfowl of the World*, provides stunning images and biological information about all 167 species of ducks, geese and swans on Earth and is available from garykramer.net.