

# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### BOBWHITE

*Colinus virginianus*



**Habitat:** Grasslands, agricultural lands, and brushy woodlands.

**Weight:** Six ounces

**Length:** 10 inches

**Food:** Food habits vary with the season and the age of the bird, but in general, seeds, grains, fruits, and insects make up the bulk of the diet.

**Identification:** The bobwhite quail belongs to the order Galliformes which are birds described as chicken-like with feet adapted for scratching. The bobwhite is much smaller than its upland game associates, the ruffed grouse and wild turkey. Bobwhites are mottled-gray, brown, black, and white in color. Males are easily distinguished from females by their pure white throat and eye bands. In the hen, these markings are buff-colored. As in most birds, the hen is generally more modestly-colored than the cock.

**Range:** Central and eastern United States from Minnesota and Massachusetts south to Florida and the Gulf Coast. Also found in Wyoming and southern Ontario, Mexico, parts of Central America, and Cuba.

**Reproduction:** Bobwhites are gregarious in nature throughout most of the year, forming coveys composed

of broods raised in neighboring territories. Coveys usually are made up of about thirty birds, often roosting shoulder to shoulder in order to keep warm during the winter months; a few birds may even perch atop their neighbors. If disturbed, a covey may "explode" into flight. These coveys remain quite stable, and regroup after being flushed. Attempts in Connecticut to introduce bobwhites into new areas have not been successful, nor have attempts to bolster an existing stock with more southerly birds, for the progeny lack the vigor of the hardier existing stock.

Coveys hold together from when they are first formed in late summer until spring, just prior to the start of the mating season. It is at this time that males begin to announce their territories with the familiar "bob-white"

whistle. The bobwhite is a ground-nester, with nesting activities usually underway in Connecticut by mid-to-late April. Nests are normally found in fairly open areas. An average of 12 to 15 creamy white eggs are deposited and incubated for 23 to 24 days. Male bobwhite are monogamous and choose one mate to share nesting responsibilities.

Approximately one-third of all nests started are successful. If nests are destroyed prior to hatching, the hens will usually re-nest. Nest destruction or desertion can be caused by natural disasters (floods, fires, etc.) or by humans, dogs, house cats, or other predators disturbing the nest. Of the chicks that hatch, less than one-third survive to reach their first birthday.

**History in Connecticut:** Colonial records indicate that bobwhite were present in southern New England 300 years ago, along with other upland natives including ruffed grouse, wild turkeys, and heath hens. Bobwhite populations probably expanded as southern New England was cleared for agriculture. During the 1800s when agriculture was at its peak, bobwhite were found throughout most of the state.

Today, bobwhite can be found primarily in southeastern Connecticut with smaller populations found in the northeast section.

**Interesting Facts:** The bobwhite quail is commonly referred to as the "King of native American game birds". In some southern states, the bobwhite is still the most important game bird. In Connecticut, bobwhite popula-

tions are limited and hunting, though allowed, is not extensive. The bobwhite's rapid, erratic flight, together with its small size, make it a challenge for the upland gunner. It is regarded as one of the most delicious table game birds of all.

Predators of bobwhite include foxes, owls, hawks, and stray cats and dogs.

**Habitat Requirements and Management:** Without good habitat, bobwhite populations are severely affected. The bobwhite requires several habitat types: grass in the spring and summer for nesting and brood rearing, cropland for fall and winter feeding, and brushy woodlands for escape and roosting cover. Additionally, all of the habitat types need to be within a quarter of a mile of each other. The grass habitat is usually the limiting factor for bobwhite because it is often mowed or converted to cropland. Hedgerows are also very important, providing sources of food and cover.

The following are recommendations to improve bobwhite habitat:

- (1). Leave an unmowed grass border of at least five to 12 feet along the edges of agricultural fields.
- (2). Keep ditch banks in undisturbed grass.
- (3). Allow field corners, borders, and rights-of-way to grow up in natural cover.
- (4). Mow or burn extremely dense thickets.
- (5). Avoid widespread use of chemicals and pesticides.



*The Technical Assistance Informational Series is 75 percent funded by Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration—the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Program. The P-R Program provides funding through an excise tax on the sale of sporting firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. The remaining 25 percent of the funding is matched by the Connecticut Wildlife Division.*