

AN ANALYSIS OF A SAMPLE QUAIL HARVEST IN MISSISSIPPI

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There is good evidence that the annual quail harvest in Mississippi consists of about one million birds. Other than this, little information has been available concerning the pattern of this annual take. This report gives the results of a study of the quail hunts of 125 sportsmen from December 10, 1948 through February 10, 1949.

METHODS

Several days before the opening of the gunning season calendars were mailed to about 300 sportsmen. These calendars requested the sportsmen to keep a daily record of their quail hunts and to return them to the Game and Fish Commission at the close of the season. Postal card reminders were mailed at intervals of about three weeks. A few days before the season ended a letter was mailed to each of them requesting the return of the calendars. Self-addressed envelopes were enclosed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All of the sportsmen contacted were known to be better than average quail hunters since their reported take of quail for the pervious season was known. This information had been gathered as a part of a questionnaire survey of game kill for the 1947 - 48 hunting season. This type of sportsman was selected intentionally because a majority of the quail killed each year are undoubtedly taken by the expert hunters. In the earlier survey, 780 quail hunters reported a kill of 20,282 quail and 237 (30%) of them accounted for more than 15,273 (70%) of the total.

Graphs of the total kill, total hunts, hunting success for each week of the season are shown in Fig. 1.

To the question "Was this season better or worse than last year?" 44 answered "better" and the same number thought it worse. The remainder indicated that hunting was about the same as the previous year or did not answer the question. The locations of the sportsmen answering "better" and "worse" were plotted on a state map. There was no evidence of consistent answers in any particular region. It is believed significant that the sportsmen who thought hunting had improved hunted more often and with greater success.

Nothing of a surprising nature turned up in the tabulations unless it was the large number of quail harvested by these hunters (4.0 per hunt and 65.9 for the season average). The total kill went down steadily each week until the final week when it jumped back almost on a par with the first week. This increased kill at the last was accompanied by a corresponding increase in the total number of hunts.

Hunting success (quail per hunt) generally declined as the season progressed,

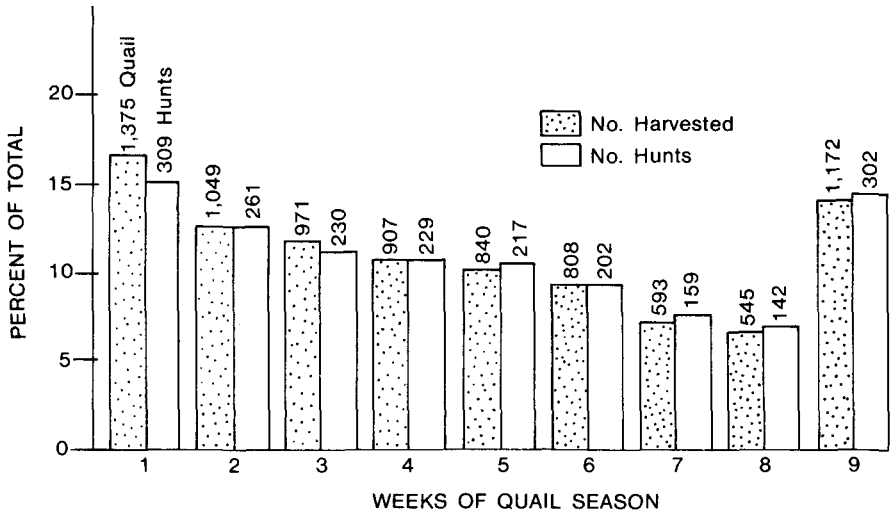


Fig. 1. Weekly quail harvest. (December 10 through February 10. 123 sportsmen reporting. 2,051 hunts, 8,242 quail.)

though never enough to suggest that the quail population had been thinned excessively (Fig. 2). It was, in fact, showing an up-swing the last two weeks. This was probably the result of cover conditions favoring the hunter during this late winter period.

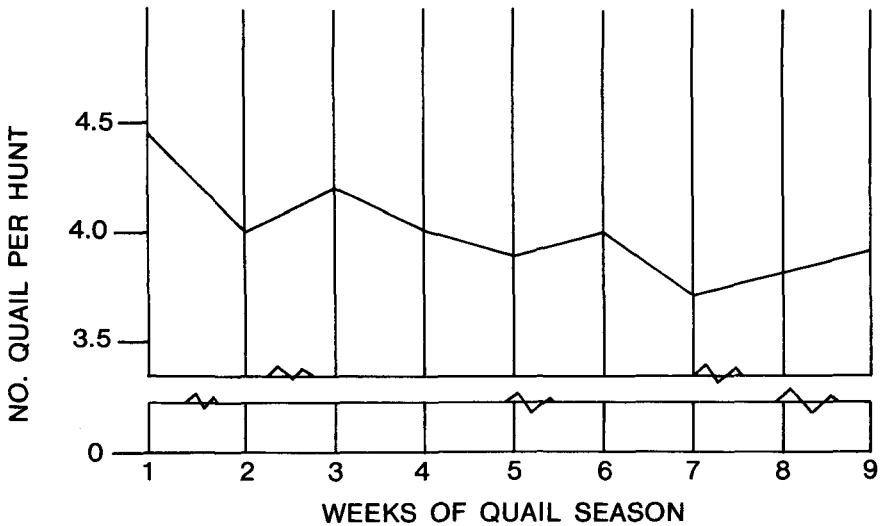


Fig. 2. Quail killed per hunt.

These results help to confirm an opinion held by wildlife workers in Mississippi and other southeastern states that the quail picture is not nearly so dark as painted by the majority of sportsmen. Unfortunately, it also shows that any change for the better that can be recognized by this majority must be a large one or else there must be a change in the sportsmen themselves. This is because the present unequal distribution of the kill is the major cause of dissatisfaction and this unequal distribution is primarily caused by the differences in hunting abilities and techniques of the hunters.

Successful quail hunting is a highly specialized sport. It is not only expensive but requires more time than the average sportsman can give. Most of the sportsmen who hunt quail are without the most important requirement — good bird dogs. Further, they do not locate quail coveys before the season opens. After a few unsuccessful attempts they declare that there is an alarming scarcity of quail and demand that the season be closed early.

This clamor for a shorter season was especially loud in Mississippi in January and early February of 1949. It was feared by some that insufficient breeding stock remained long before the season closed. This opinion apparently was not shared by the people who harvest most of the quail since they hunted about as much the last week of the season as the first. Neither is it substantiated by their hunting success.

At the present time (October 1949) it is quite clear that the quail were not overshot during the last season. The quail population is believed to be greater than at the same time last year. Even if this be true, it will escape the notice of most sportsmen who will certainly report another depleted crop of quail soon after the season opens.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Mississippi had a good quail population in the fall of 1948.
2. Gun pressure did not reduce the population to a dangerous low.
3. The real cause of dissatisfaction on the part of the average quail hunter is not shortage of birds but unequal distribution of the harvest.