



NESTING. Quail live on the borders, or edges, of habitats where pastures or crop fields meet fencerows that then might merge into trees. They move along at the base of weeds, grasses or shrub canopies between different locales where they feed, nest and take cover.

REFUGE. Within the woods, 40 to 50% of the ground has to get sunlight. This helps quail by allowing native grasses, weeds and wildflowers to grow. For good growth you may have to do a controlled burn every three years.

FOOD. This food plot could just as well be open pasture or CRP—and often is, particularly in the Midwest. Conservation experts believe a covey of quail (10 to 15 birds) can live comfortably on 10 acres through winter if all their habitat needs are met.

ILLUSTRATION: RAY E. WATKINS JR.

A Never-Ending Hunt for Quail

Here are the basic steps to building your own quail course.

Quail require varying habitats in close proximity to each other for food, nesting and refuge. The bird is largely concerned with a living space from ground level to a height of about 3 feet on a fairly confined area.

The illustration above shows an ideal managed habitat preserve for quail at our Wiregrass Preserve property, about 20 acres in all. The course is mixed woodland canopies—pines and hardwoods up high, shrubs and grasses down low, with food plots mixed in.

Here's a tip about cover: If you can walk through a field or pasture without lifting your feet to get through the ground cover, then there will be enough room for quail to run. In general terms, ideal bobwhite quail habitat should be made up of the following:

- ▶ About 50% in annual weeds, legumes or row crops.
- ▶ About 30% of the area in grasses.
- ▶ About 20% in shrubby, brushy understory.

The food plantings shown here are 30 feet wide, but could be as narrow as 15 feet. Food plots include sorghum, brown-top millet, corn, soybeans, field and partridge peas.

Shrub thickets give the birds a place to run when disturbed as well as a place to sleep. The ground should be relatively open under the thickets. Good thicket cover

(with variations for geography) include wild plums, blackberry, cedars, holly and dogwood. Experts do not recommend privet or autumn olive. Place a thicket every 100 to 300 yards.

There is no formula for wooded cover. An area that is 90% forested can support quail. But this area requires grasses, shrubs and open ground beneath the canopy. Likewise, an area that is 90% fields can support quail.

One of the most helpful things you can do for quail is to leave a buffer of about 20 feet around crop fields.

The buffer could consist of grasses such as big bluestem, little bluestem, broomsedge and other native grasses. It can also contain forbs (broadleaved nonwoody plants) such as partridge peas or beggar weeds, as well as native wildflowers.

One-third to one-half of the buffer should be lightly disked during fall or winter every year. This disturbance creates two to three different ages of plant communities.

Excellent seed producers and indicators that the habitat is on the right track for quail include ragweeds, pigweeds, foxtail grasses, panic grasses, tick trefoils and smartweeds. However, these create a weed-management challenge as you try to mix this quail-friendly habitat with your desire to produce your income crops nearby. —Des Keller