

# CLOSING REMARKS: ARE WE WHISTLING PAST THE GRAVEYARD?

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**Citation:** Brennan. L. A. 2012. Closing remarks: are we whistling past the graveyard? Proceedings of the National Quail Symposium 7:367–369.

**Key words:** case histories, hunting, management, northern bobwhites, quail, research, success

## INTRODUCTION

“Whistling past the graveyard” is an idiomatic phrase unique to the English language. It came to mind one evening when I was thinking about how to organize the closing remarks for this conference. The wiktionary.org definition of the phrase “to whistle past the graveyard” is really more of a 4-part explanation than a definition: “*To attempt to stay cheerful in a dire situation; to proceed with a task, ignoring an upcoming hazard, hoping for a good outcome.*” At first pass, it might seem strange to make connections among the 4 parts of this definition-explanation and any lessons about quail science and conservation that might be learned from Quail VII. However, as I continued to think about it, the 4 phrases that combine to define this idiom have a direct connection with the current situation with quail in the United States.

## ATTEMPT TO STAY CHEERFUL IN A DIRE SITUATION

The current situation with quail habitat and populations in the United States is dire, indeed. The recent report (Dailey et al. 2011. State of the Bobwhite: Grassland Conservation at a Crossroads, National Bobwhite Technical Committee, Knoxville, TN, USA) outlines a set of circumstances for northern bobwhites (*Colinus virginianus*) that is especially troubling. Each of the past 5 National Quail Symposia, going back to Quail III, documents a continuing and worsening situation for bobwhites. Scaled quail (*Callipepla squamata*) are also experiencing widespread declines, the endangered masked bobwhite (*Colinus v. ridgewayi*) is virtually gone from a refuge that was originally purchased for the sole purpose of recovering this species in the U.S., and the status of the rest of the western quail remains uncertain.

Despite this rather awful situation, I am amazed at the attempts my colleagues have made with respect to putting massive amounts of positive energy towards stopping the quail declines. In other words, people have stayed cheerful in this dire situation. The 2 most obvious ways that people have stayed cheerful is by development of the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative Version 2.0

(NBCI 2.0) and the Western Quail Management Plan (WQMP).

NBCI 2.0 represents a major overhaul from the original Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative. Perhaps most importantly, it contains a spatially-linked set of resources that allows managers and biologists to assess the potential of areas for habitat improvement and restoration across nearly the entire geographic range of bobwhites, and it predicts outcomes for bobwhite population density. Like all predictions it begs to be tested, and this is part of NBCI 2.0. This is unprecedented. Thus, it is critically important for moving bobwhite conservation forward.

The WQMP represents a major step forward for wildlife agencies in the American West. If nothing else, the WQMP brings western quail to the forefront of management attention and priority after languishing in the background for decades. The key to the success of both the NBCI and WQMP will be buy-in and support from state wildlife agency administrators.

The third thing that quail scientists and managers have done to stay cheerful in a dire situation is to conduct a rather impressive amount of research since the last National Quail Symposium 5 years ago. With 80+ presentations (both oral and poster), Quail VII represents a high water mark with respect to the quantity of research findings communicated at a National Quail Symposium. For example, the past 5 National Quail Symposia averaged ~ 46 presentations per conference (Quail III = 29 presentations, Quail IV = 64, Quail V = 54, and Quail VI = 38, respectively).

Of course, National Quail Symposia are not the only outlet for quail research. There has been a recent spate of books as well as stream of articles in the peer-reviewed literature that continue to communicate new research findings about quail. While the vast majority of this effort is directed at bobwhites, this is nothing new. Material on bobwhites has dominated the past 5 National Quail Symposia.

## TO PROCEED WITH A TASK

Implementing NBCI 2.0 and the WQMP are clearly 2 tasks with which quail conservationists must proceed as they whistle past the graveyard. This brief essay is not the place to drill into the details of implementing these

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landmark initiatives. However, I think it is safe to say that our next generation of wildlife scientists and managers (the ones who are just entering university wildlife programs today) will have major roles in implementing NBCI 2.0 and the WQMP.

Of course, there is that old bromide: “More research is needed.” In 2011 the quail world experienced something unprecedented, populations were doing poorly everywhere, from east to west and north to south, as a result of drought in the west and southeast, and severe winter or too much rain in the east. Will quail populations once again rebound 100%, or will the continuing decline in habitat suitability translate to a step-down in long-term quail recovery? Thus, whether bobwhites and other species of quail operate as metapopulations needs to be addressed, along with the implications related to dispersal, landscape permeability, and amount of habitat area needed to maintain population persistence, etc.

## IGNORE AN UPCOMING HAZARD

Nearly every prevailing land use in the continental United States is hostile to sustaining and elevating populations of wild quail. The iron triangle of intensive-farming, industrial forestry that grows and harvests trees like corn, and the inexorable sprawl of suburbia have been the death knell for wild quail over many 10s and even 100s of millions of hectares. Grazing and rangeland management is also problematic especially where exotic grasses, so-called “improved” pastures, and excessive stocking rates predominate. However, rangelands that contain mostly native vegetation, and are not overgrazed, represent one of the best, and last, economical opportunities for quail conservation today.

NBCI 2.0 and the WQMP are not ignoring these land-use hazards when it comes to quail conservation. In fact, they are addressing many of these issues either head-on, or through influencing policy through the political process. Researchers are not ignoring these hazards either. For example, studies of the effects of exotic grasses on quail habitat use and production are something of a growth industry in places like Texas and the Southeastern states. Knowing, for example, that some of these introduced grasses, such as buffelgrass (*Pennisetum ciliare*), provide adequate nesting cover but inadequate foraging cover for quail has been an important step forward with respect to understanding the hazards they present to quail.

## HOPE FOR A GOOD OUTCOME

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the places where we will have wild quail, and the opportunities to hunt them, will be the places where people implement purposeful management that provides habitat on the appropriate scale which will support their annual life cycle needs. We see the effects of purposeful management on quail today. For example, Conservation Reserve Program initiatives in the Southeast and Midwest states failed to provide any kind of purposeful management for bobwhites for > 20

years until the longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*) initiative and the buffers for bobwhites (field borders) programs took hold.

In places such as the Red Hills of Georgia and Florida or the vast rangelands of South Texas, people have made a conscious decision, based on various sets of strategies, tactics and motives, to keep quail habitat intact. It should come as no surprise, that areas like these contain sustainable and huntable populations of bobwhites. Cultural management, however, seems to be all the rage these days. Cultural management include actions such as supplemental feeding, releasing pen-raised birds, controlling predators, translocating wild birds, or political maneuvering to shorten hunting seasons and/or reduce bag limits. Cultural management does not sustain or restore wild quail in and of itself. Purposeful management does. Purposeful management is the essential component if hope for a good quail conservation outcome is to be realized.

## AN ALTERNATIVE DEFINITION

There is a second, alternative definition of “to whistle past the graveyard” in wiktionary.org that is much more foreboding than the first one that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. This alternative definition is: “*To enter a situation with little or no understanding of the possible consequences.*” The current situation for quail in the U.S. clearly represent a situation where we may have only a foggy view of the possible consequences of our quail conservation efforts. Indeed, drought, severe winter, massive wildfires, climate change, and anthropogenic-caused extinctions are all possible consequences in this world. However, not knowing the possible negative consequences of attempting to provide positive solutions to challenges such as quail conservation is not a legitimate reason to shy away from such pursuits. By ignoring the ongoing quail conservation crisis, we can be certain that quail numbers will have even less chance of being sustained and elevated than they would by implementing NBCI, WQMP, and other efforts.

## A NEED FOR SUCCESS STORIES

One of the glaring omissions from the Quail VII program is case histories of management successes. Of the more than 70 papers presented, only 1 (on mountain quail [*Oreortyx pictus*]) documented there were more birds on the study areas at the end of the project than there were at the beginning, which represents a combination of purposeful management (riparian vegetation restored for Salmonids also restored quail habitat) and cultural efforts (translocation of wild birds). Success stories are out there, and we need to create more of them. Back in October 2011, I was stunned at a paragraph in an e-mail from my colleague Dick Potts (Box 1). I never thought that recovery of the partridge populations on his Sussex study area would have been possible in our lifetimes. I sincerely hope that when Quail VIII takes place in Tennessee in 2017, there will

Box 1. Excerpt from an e-mail from G. R. Dick Potts, Director Emeritus of the Game Conservancy Trust, regarding recent gray partridge (*Perdix perdix*) restoration efforts in Sussex. This area in the United Kingdom experienced a 90%+ decline in partridges from the 1960s to the early 21<sup>st</sup> century

Dear Lenny,

Things have just got better and better here.

Biodiversity has been almost completely restored on a 1,200-ha part of my Sussex study area. Partridge numbers are up 100-fold without any rearing with 400–500 now shot per year, and all achieved since I last saw you in 2006!

Dick Potts

Fordingbridge, UK

24 October 2011

be a prominent, and well-populated with presentations, session on the program dedicated to case histories of quail management success stories.

## TO ANSWER THE QUESTION

So, are we really “Whistling Past the Graveyard” when it comes to quail science and conservation? In many ways, we are. However, I will argue that we are whistling past the graveyard in the best possible way, knowing full well that we are doing everything we can to make sure the graveyard of past quail conservation failures does not get any bigger. The success of NBCI Version 2.0 and the WQMP will be judged on the success stories that emerge from management efforts related to these initiatives. The successful application of the body of research information presented at this conference, as well as in peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books over the past century will be key to the purposeful management actions required to sustain and elevate populations of wild quail.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely appreciate the invitation from the Quail VII Program Committee to contribute these thoughts and comments. I also appreciate the editorial guidance provided by T. V. Dailey and C. E. Braun that improved this paper.