

Sasser: The mission for Park Cities Quail is clear



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Group is committed to increasing quail numbers in Texas

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Texas quail may be in decline, but they have a generous ally in Park Cities Quail.

Last week, the volunteer organization wrote checks totaling \$770,000 for quail research and conservation. The money is the net proceeds from PCQ's 2013 fundraiser held in March.

The group also announced country music legend George Strait as recipient of the 2014 T. Boone Pickens Lifetime Sportsman Award. Details for the event and the organization are at parkcitiesquail.org. Strait is a third generation landowner, committed conservationist and avid sportsman.

"George Strait shares our passion and commitment to see wild quail restored to historic levels," said Pickens, who is PCQ chairman emeritus.

In seven years, PCQ has contributed \$3.4 million to quail research. One of the grants awarded last week went to Ron Kendall, a professor in Texas Tech's Department of Environmental Toxicology.

Kendall, a quail hunter and biologist, received a grant to assess toxicology of aflatoxins from deer corn and the impact of pesticides in quail ecosystems.

Texas deer hunters put out millions of pounds of corn each fall to draw game near their hunting blinds. A lot of birds and other animals eat the corn. Corn is susceptible to aflatoxin, a toxin produced by fungi.

Kendall said the agriculture industry has done a pretty good job of testing and labeling deer corn as being good enough for wildlife feed, but it is unclear what happens after the corn is bagged and labeled.

"What happens to leftover corn that's stored in the barn all summer?" asked Kendall. "What about corn left in a feeder where it's exposed to six or seven months of weather extremes, and then the feeder is activated?"

"I plan to answer these questions by taking test samples directly from deer feeders, literally throughout the Rolling Plains."

PCQ made research grants to Texas A&M, Sul Ross Borderlands Research Institute, the University of North Texas, the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, Quail-Tech Alliance and the Rolling Plains Quail Research Ranch.

Research topics range from supplemental feeding to the creation of quail corridors that link quality North Texas habitat.

Kendall is also looking closely at pesticides commonly used in West Texas, particularly on wheat fields. Researchers are analyzing quail blood for pesticide traces. It's there, and they've even found DDT, a powerful chemical that hasn't been used in decades but apparently remains in the soil.

"We don't have a silver bullet yet, but we do have a lot of smoking guns," said Kendall. "The problem may be indirect, meaning something that suppresses the birds' immune system, making them more susceptible to parasites or disease."

Kendall said the collaboration of research teams throughout Texas targeting every potential negative factor has made him confident that the quail puzzle will be solved.

"As a quail hunter, I can tell you that we had a lot of birds in July 2010, and they were gone by November 2010," said Kendall. "Something happened to them. It's not a habitat issue."