

SOUTHERN HEROES

Ronald Kendall: The Quail Doctor

The Texan is helping bring back the bobwhite, icon of Southern game birds

by **MIKE GRUDOWSKI**

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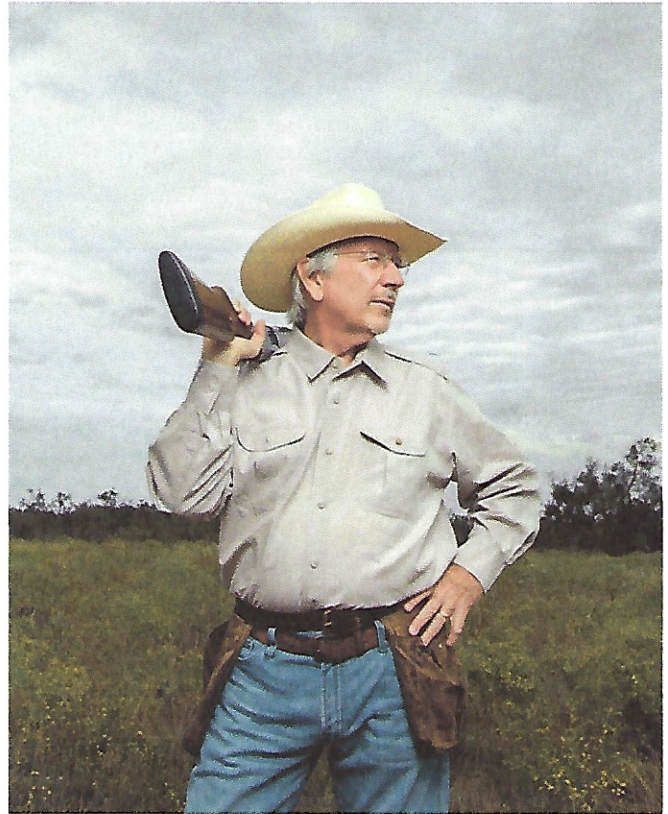


PHOTO: TREVOR PAULHUS

“I’m hopeful and encouraged and excited by what I’ve seen,” says Ronald Kendall, a professor of environmental toxicology and head of the Wildlife Toxicology Laboratory at Texas Tech University. This may sound like a stretch for someone as preoccupied with bobwhite quail as he is. The last fifty years have not been kind to that iconic Southern game bird, which concerned observers call “the canary of the prairie”; in that span, Kendall says, the species has endured “the collapse of most of its original native range.”



PHOTO: TREVOR PAULHUS

A quail at the Wildlife Toxicology Laboratory at Texas Tech University.

Even in the Rolling Plains of Texas, more than twenty million acres in the state's western grasslands that remain a relative stronghold of bobwhite habitat, "the booms are less a boom, and the busts are bigger busts." After an especially sharp drop in West Texas bobwhite numbers alarmed hunters in 2010 and 2011, Kendall spearheaded research that eventually zeroed in on what he's convinced are the main culprits of that decline: eye worms and cecal worms, parasites that infect birds by way of insects like grasshoppers and crickets and can "expand into pandemics in a hurry." The invaders weaken the birds' immunity and make them more vulnerable to predators—so much so that this past winter's bobwhite season was stacking up to be another bust on par with the apocalyptic decline nine years earlier.



PHOTO: TREVOR PAULHUS

Eye worm.

So what makes Kendall—himself a longtime quail hunter who owns a 2,200-acre ranch outside Lubbock—optimistic? He has invented a medicated feed called QuailGuard, currently awaiting FDA approval, which in field tests appears to help birds recover and prevent populations from bottoming out. “We’ve seen some bigger coveys on ranches where we’ve treated,” he says. Kendall has also studied and helped establish sanctuaries for monarch butterflies, “another iconic species under great threat” that often shares habitat with quail. “I see these as sentinels,” he explains. “It’s my opinion that the survival of the human race is dependent on the survival of our wildlife.”



PHOTO: TREVOR PAULHUS

Kendall's Llewelin setter.

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