

BEST THING IN TEXAS

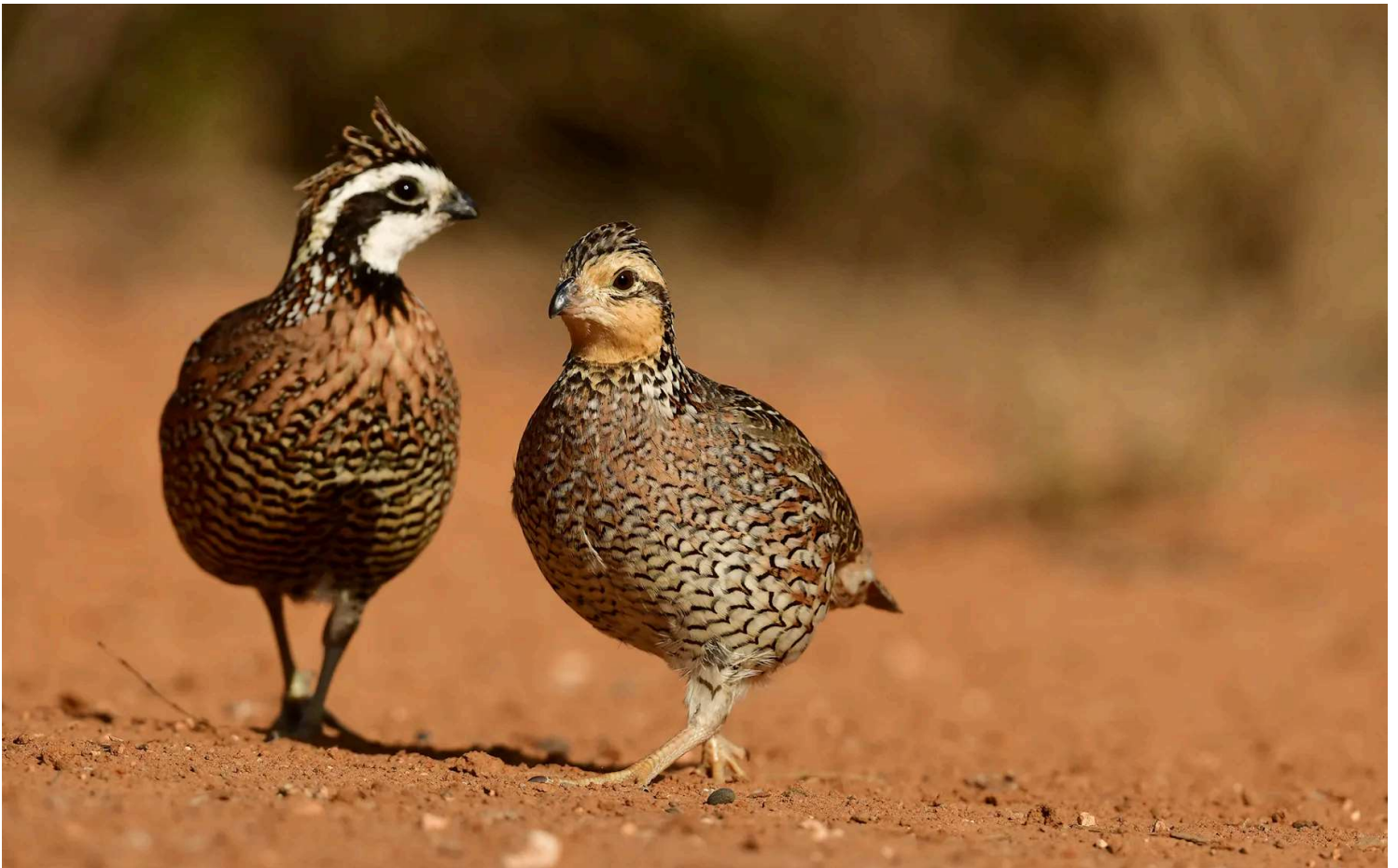
# Parasites Were Killing Bobwhite Quail. Texas Hunters Helped Create a Drug to Save Them.

QuailGuard is the first publicly available FDA-approved medication for wild animals.



By Russell Gold

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Male and female wild bobwhite quail.

Jeff R Clow/Getty

**WHO:** A Texas Tech professor and an organization of Dallas-area hunters.

**WHAT:** An FDA-approved medicated feed for wild quails that eradicates parasitic worms.

**WHY IT'S SO GREAT:** The northern bobwhite quail, a game bird once ubiquitous across much of Texas, is struggling. Its population in the **Rolling Plains** region, which stretches from just east of Lubbock to slightly north of Abilene, is significantly below historic levels. “We expect only scattered pockets of good hunting this year,” notes Texas Parks and Wildlife’s forecast for quail season in the region.

There are many reasons for the **long-term**, nationwide decline of the grassland bird, notably habitat loss and fragmentation. In Texas, another factor appears to be partly responsible: parasitic worms. Quail in the Rolling Plains are rife with these tiny invaders that proliferate in the intestines and eyes. Although more research is needed, scientists believe the parasites may interfere with food digestion and vision, making it harder for afflicted birds to survive.

Now a long-term research project—partly funded by the **Park Cities Quail Coalition**, a nonprofit founded by hunting enthusiasts in Dallas—has led to the development of a medicinal feed that eliminates worms from the pint-size birds. In May, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the use of the drug for quail, making it the first FDA-approved medicine for wild animals available to the public.

The effort began after an especially poor hunting season in 2010. Quail populations go through boom-and-bust cycles, often depending on the amount of precipitation and brush cover. The weather that year was promising, but when hunters took their bird dogs out, they had trouble finding any coveys (flocks). “It wasn’t huntable,” said Joe Crafton, a board member of the Park Cities Quail Coalition. What had happened to the wild population was a “total mystery,” he said.



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Crafton and other quail hunters in the Dallas area raised \$7 million to fund research into what was happening to the quail population. Enter Texas Tech University professor of wildlife toxicology Ronald Kendall, who suspected that widespread parasitic infections might be the culprit. His research found that up to **98 percent** of wild quail in the Rolling Plains carried the parasites. The hunters' coalition funded Kendall to devise a solution.

Finding a medicine wasn't difficult. Fenbendazole was already used to treat parasites in cattle and chickens, and Kendall suspected the drug would be effective in quail as well. But convincing the federal government of the safety and efficacy of the treatment was arduous, as was figuring out how to get wild birds to take their medicine.

Kendall's son—Ron Kendall Jr.—took over the design challenge. He started with a tarp-covered feeder inside a large dog kennel, which worked to help the quail feel safe from predators. He experimented with different designs to keep out turkey, raccoons, and hogs. Eventually, Ron Jr. struck on what looks like a squat pyramid with the top lopped off and mesh around the bottom. The birds enter through triangular openings and peck at a metal table hanging underneath a feed hopper.

The first test—on a ranch in Mitchell County—had remarkable results. All of the quail that ate the medicated feed saw a marked reduction in parasites. Further studies were undertaken, at the insistence of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The results **were clear**: ranches where wild quail had access

to the medicine showed healthy populations. “Where we were using the medicated feed, we weren’t seeing quail crashes and we were seeing sustainable quail populations,” said Kendall.

The approved medicated feed, called QuailGuard, is now being manufactured in Aledo, west of Fort Worth, and should be available to ranchers by the fall. It is majority-owned by the Park Cities Quail Coalition, which plans to direct profits back into quail research and efforts to educate landowners on how to create quail-friendly habitats. The rest of the company is owned by Kendall and Texas Tech.

At Crafton’s ranch, near Aspermont, a town about a ninety-minute drive east of Lubbock, where some of the testing took place, the results are remarkable. “When we talk to our neighboring ranches, most of them didn’t even hunt because there weren’t enough birds,” said Crafton. “At the same time, we were finding fifteen coveys a day.”

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