

# Farmer, forester team to revive N.J. quail population

■ A habitat for the chickenlike bird has been created on about 1,500 acres in Burlington County.

**BY EDWARD COLLMORE**

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**MEDFORD** — Bill Haines Jr. used to see wild quail on his family's farm all the time when he was growing up. He heard their distinctive "bobwhite" calls and thought nothing of it.

Fifty years ago, the small chicken-like bird thrived across parts of the state. Covets of them were common. Hunters flushed them out by the scores while walking through brushy fields.

Now, their singing has all but stopped. The number of wild bobwhite quail has fallen off so precipitously that — except for small pockets — they're close to extinction in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and barely holding on in Delaware, wildlife ecologists say.

Choked forests, paved roads, housing developments, herbicides and pesticides have destroyed food sources and nesting grounds. The birds disappeared as their habitat disappeared.

But Haines and certified forester Bob Williams hope to change that. They've created a haven for them — using prescribed burns and tree-thinning to produce the quail's optimum surroundings on about 1,500

acres adjacent to Haines' Pine Island Cranberry Co. operations in Burlington County.

In the spring, 80 wild northern bobwhite quail brought in from Georgia will be released on the Haines property as part of a three-year conservation initiative. Eighty more of the plump, short-tailed birds will be released in the second year and another 80 in the third year.

Conservationists see the project as a possible model for other such research and restoration projects across the state and the nation, and as a productive new avenue of cooperation for forest and wildlife officials.

"I would love to see (the quail) re-established," Haines told The Philadelphia Inquirer. The Medford resident oversees the largest cranberry operation in New Jersey and one of the top five in the country. "We're bringing back something that was here anyway."

Almost every day, Haines drives his pickup over a quail's road to visit the family's prospective new home — a blend of landscapes in the heart of his 14,000-acre property. Trees were cut down, brush cleared with controlled burns, and grasses planted



A female bobwhite quail scampers down Beach Avenue in Middle Township in this 2009 photo.

Staff photo by Michael Miller

to provide nesting places — much of it at Haines' expense.

In addition to the land, the Haines family — through its foundation — provided \$50,000 toward the preparation of the land and other expenses. The University of Delaware provided \$7,000, and the rest of the \$187,000 project was covered through grants.

"This is a demonstration," said Haines, who sees a symbiotic relationship between his farm and surrounding forest. "This will show that you can successfully manage a business in the Pines that not only doesn't damage the environment but enhances it."

"We take care of the resources we have," he said. "It's good for business and

it's the right thing to do."

A driving force behind the forest management work and the quail project is Williams, owner and founder of Pine Creek Forestry LLC in Laurel Springs, Camden County.

The nation's quail population "has been in free fall because the land changed," said Williams, of Deptford, who oversees Haines' woodlands. "Agricultural practices changed and forests were allowed to become thick and overgrown — and quail can't deal with that."

"You need to manage the forest, and here is a place where someone did," he said. "Now, we're putting a bird back into the ecosystem. Quail may be a poster child for show-

ing how this works."

Haines and Williams have been working with New Jersey Audubon, the Tall Timbers Research and Land Conservancy in Florida, the University of Delaware and other wildlife biologists who hope to see the work at Chatsworth duplicated in many other places.

The project at the Haines property can't come too soon. Only 600 wild quail were estimated to remain in the southern half of the state, according to a state survey in 2010 — and those numbers have not likely changed much, state officials said.

"We don't want to lose this bird," said John Cecil, vice president of stewardship of New Jersey Audubon. "There are some in Cumberland and Salem counties, but they're virtually extinct" in the rest of the state.

"We have to understand how to recover the species," he said. "The bird is not doing well anywhere except Georgia and Florida, with some populations in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi."

In addition to the Haines site, two quail habitats on Maryland's Eastern Shore have been selected as places to reintroduce the bird.

The bobwhite quail will be fitted with radio collars so researchers can monitor

their locations on the land, Cecil said. Where will they spend most of their time? How many will survive? "Many will not," Cecil said. "The weather will be a factor in terms of snow and cold temperatures. We will track them until the batteries die."

Quail nest in grassland and usually produce 12 chicks per couple, said Chris Williams, a professor of wildlife ecology at the University of Delaware working on the bobwhite quail initiative. The birds prefer walking to flying and don't migrate. They eat insects in summer and seeds at other times, and use shrubby habitat to avoid predators such as hawks.

The university professor was "shocked" when he saw Haines' managed forest for the first time. He said it was "some of the best habitat for quail — like Georgia and Florida — but this was New Jersey."

"We're in a position where we're trying to get the Pine Barrens to look the way it did 70 years ago," Williams said. "We know quail were there, and now we'll see if they will respond and breed successfully on this re-created landscape."

"Will they have the food and cover they need to escape predators?" he asked. "We're doing it right, but no one knows."

## State briefs

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