

Northern Bobwhite Status Report, 2025

Agriculture and Grassland Wildlife Program Note 25-1

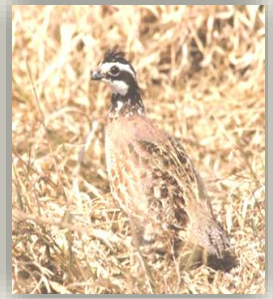


Photo by Adele Hodde

Northern Bobwhite Quail Hunting in Illinois

Quail hunting in Illinois was very popular for most of the early and mid-1900's with well over 150,000 hunters. Harvest was estimated at over 2 million quail per year from the 1950's through the early 1970's. Due primarily to changes in land use and farming practices, this abundant game bird which was a byproduct of the agricultural landscape in the early part of the 20th century began a dramatic decline in the mid 1970's (Figure 1).

Estimates of harvest and the number of quail hunters put this decline in perspective; by 1990, there were 84,000 hunters and they harvested 937,000 birds. Ten years later, there were 40,500 quail hunters and a harvest of 271,500 birds. The small, diverse farms of the 1950's had abundant small grains (wheat, oats etc.), livestock and hay fields with lots of fencerows and hedgerows separating small fields that provided great cover for quail.

Today, corn and soybeans have replaced most of the small grains, pastures, and hayfields that were once common in Illinois. The hedgerows and fencerows that provided cover for game are gone or have developed to stands of mature trees, leaving very little quail habitat and eliminating suitable travel corridors between the remaining blocks of habitat. In addition, field size and the size of equipment have increased dramatically in the last 50 years. Larger and more efficient equipment decrease the amount of time it takes to harvest crops. Most fields are disked soon after harvest, covering most crop stubble early in the fall. There is very little winter cover left and crops get planted quickly in the spring. During the summer, 'recreational' or aesthetic mowing of homesteads, roadsides, and non-crop areas often occurs during prime nesting season (April – August) for the northern bobwhite, ring-necked pheasant and other grassland birds. The changes to the landscape and the loss of habitat have occurred slowly, over several decades, but the additive effects on quail and pheasant populations are dramatic.

Illinois Quail Harvest and Hunters 1955-2024

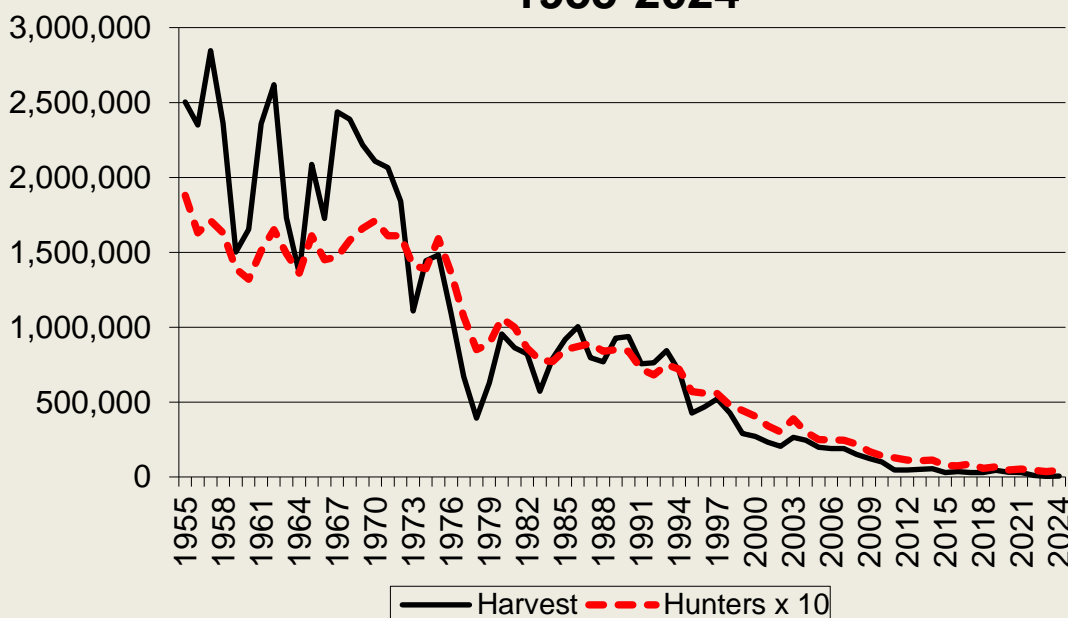


Figure 1. *Illinois Quail Harvest and Quail Hunters 1955 – 2024.

2024-25 Hunter Harvest

At the time of this report, the 2024-25 Hunter Harvest Survey has not been finalized. Preliminary estimates indicate that 4,351 hunters harvested 6,216 wild quail in Illinois, compared to an estimated 3,581 hunters and 3,713 wild quail harvested during the 2023-24 season. These hunter and harvest numbers represent a rebound from the all-time lows for Illinois, set in the 2023-24 season, supporting last year's forecast for population increases across much of the state.

Illinois Quail Harvest and Hunters 2016 - 2024

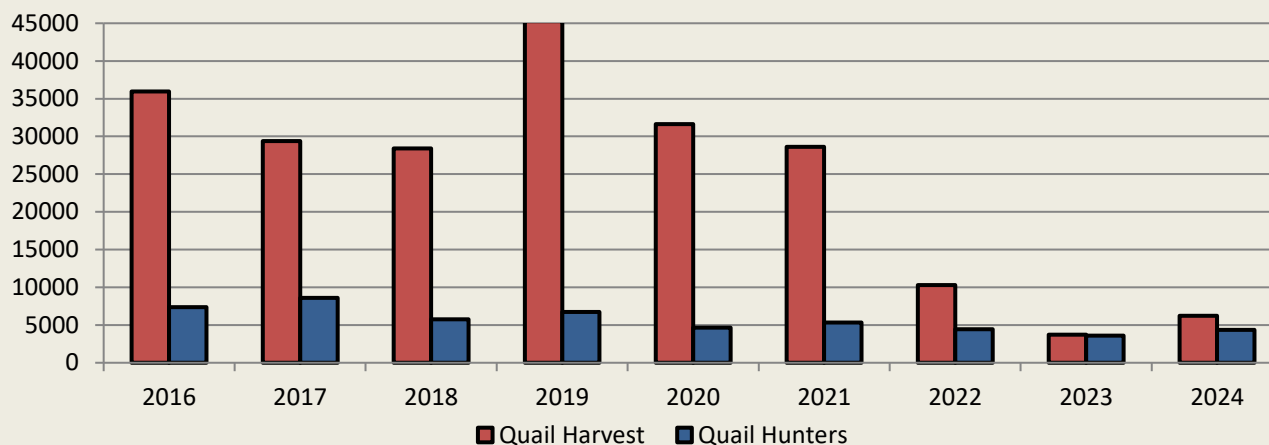
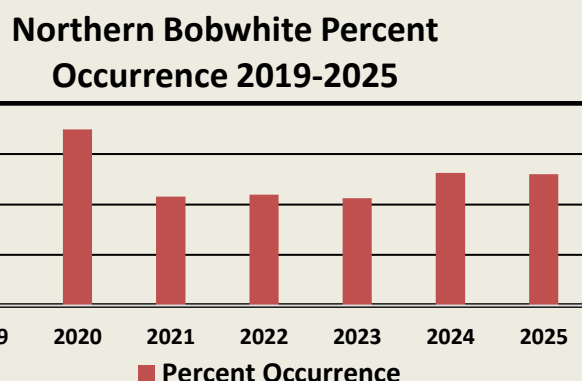
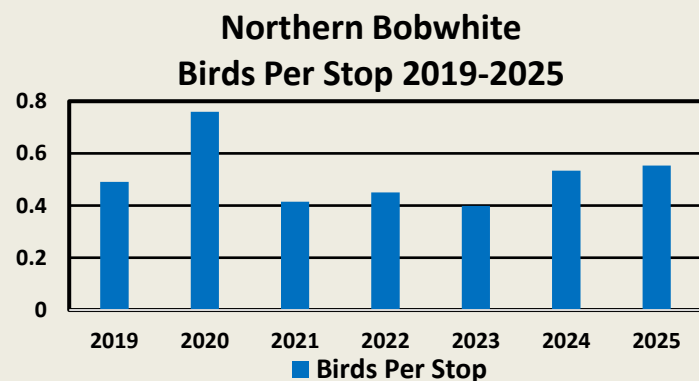


Figure 2. *Quail Harvest and Quail Hunters 2016 – 2024.

Quail Population Index

There are established routes across the state and biologists run the routes two times annually during the spring/summer. The first run is completed during the peak breeding window for ring-necked pheasant (May 10 – June 10) and the second run is completed during the peak of quail breeding (June 10 – July 10). Each route has 20 stops, where biologists stop for 3 minutes, and record individual birds seen or heard. The number of routes surveyed annually depends on staff availability, but as many of the surveys are completed as possible.

During 2025, observers recorded an average of 0.55 quail per stop during the surveys (3.6% increase from 2024), and quail were recorded at 25.9% of stops (1.2% decrease from 2024).



Figures 3 and 4.* Birds per Stop and Percent Occurrence Trends for Northern Bobwhite on Upland Routes

Weather 2024-25

Outside of three weeks in January, the winter of 2024-25 in the primary quail range of Illinois was mild. However, during the weeks mentioned previously, the temperatures remained well below normal, with few

seeing temperatures above the freezing point throughout that stretch. Also, winter precipitation was in play, with the northern two-thirds of the state covered in several inches of snow and the southern third of Illinois experiencing heavy ice accumulations. Even with this extended period of cold and winter precipitation, quail appeared to weather the storm quite well, although the ice in Southern Illinois likely contributed to added winter mortality within that region. The mild temperatures carried over into spring, with good rainfall throughout much of the state. What was concerning though, was several widespread, heavy rain events throughout May and June. Southern Illinois was exceptionally wet during the first half of the quail nesting season, which may have impacted initial nesting attempts. Nesting and brood rearing conditions throughout July and August improved, leading to some production. Above normal temperatures through September and into early October may have extended quail production into the fall, although droughty conditions may have curtailed brood survival. Overall, weather conditions were fair to good for bobwhite survival and production in 2025.

2025-26 Season Outlook

As with most years in Illinois, the key to a successful quail season will be finding high-quality habitat, which remains limited. The most productive quail regions in the state this year are Central and West-central Illinois. Expect poor to fair hunting across Southern Illinois. Also, don't be surprised if you find a covey within what is typically considered pheasant country. Establishing quality quail habitat or managing existing habitat is more important than ever for the future of quail and quail hunting.

Habitat Management Tips

- ‘Stone’s Throw’ escape cover – A good rule of thumb for evaluating the amount of escape cover in your quail management area is to think about how far you can throw a rock. You should be able to stand anywhere on the property and throw a rock into escape cover (blackberry brambles, shrub thickets, giant ragweed patches, etc.). If you can – well done! If not, then it’s probably not as good of quail habitat as it could be!
- Good quail habitat looks messy and “weedy”. Fields that look ‘clean’ with tall grasses dominating, are probably not good quail habitat! Periodic disturbance of CRP (mid-contract management), with USDA guidance and permission, is essential in keeping these stands of grass productive for quail.
- Throughout the year, work to reduce the amount that you mow, and break up the timing of when you mow. Try not to mow more than 1/3 or 1/4 of any field, waterways or fallow areas at a time. This leaves important cover on the landscape for the birds, year-round. Avoid mowing during peak nesting season, from May 1 – August 15. This strategy is also important to other grassland birds and wildlife including monarch butterflies and other pollinators.
- A general guideline for quail habitat is to provide 50% brood and roosting cover (flowering forbs and scattered grasses with open, bare dirt underneath), 30% nesting cover (native grasses with scattered forbs), and 20% escape cover (thickets in and along the edges of grasslands that provide heavy cover, i.e. blackberry, dogwood, giant ragweed, sumac, loose brush piles, etc.). These components must be provided in every 10–20-acre block of suitable habitat, since quail do not typically move very far from escape cover.
- October is a good time to spray and/or disc blocks (4 – 8 acres/year for every 40) in existing grasslands that have become too thick.
- Fall mowing or burning in September or early October can clear away thatch and stimulate vigorous regrowth of cool-season grasses that invade stands of native grasses. Once this new growth reaches 6” – 12” in the fall, read and follow label directions for a foliar application of herbicide like glyphosate, to set back areas of tall fescue, brome, bluegrass or reed-canary grass. Additional herbicide applications may be needed the following spring, before native grasses begin growing and/or the following fall, after the native grasses have gone dormant.

For additional information on quail or quail management:

- Hunt Illinois, Upland Birds (<https://huntillinois.org/upland-and-small-game>)
- Illinois Department of Natural Resources, District Wildlife Biologists (<https://wildlifeillinois.org/idnr-district-wildlife-biologist>)
- Quail Forever, Habitat Management Tips (<https://quailforever.org/Habitat/Why-Habitat/Quail-Facts/Upland-Habitat-Basics.aspx>)
- National Bobwhite & Grassland Initiative (<https://nbgif.org>)
- Missouri Department of Conservation's Covey Headquarters Newsletter (<https://mdc.mo.gov/wildlife/attracting-wildlife/better-quail-habitat/covey-headquarters-newsletter>)

Thank you for your interest in the northern bobwhite quail. Have a safe and enjoyable hunting season in 2025!

Season Dates Update

November 1, 2025 – January 8, 2026 (North)

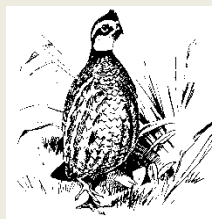
November 1, 2025 – January 15, 2026 (South)

Hours

Sunrise to Sunset

Bag Limit

8 per day with 20 in possession after the 3rd day of the season



*Prepared by Don Kahl 10/3/25
Illinois Department of Natural Resources
Division of Wildlife Resources*

**values from previous years' data were adjusted to correct calculation errors*



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