

Notes on the River

Bobwhite Quail and Duvall Farm

Some might recall in times past that virtually any sojourn in the country would be accompanied by the familiar clear rising whistle of the Bobwhite quail (*Colinus virginianus*). *Bob-white!* or *bob-bob-white!* is the seductive call given by males in spring and summer. These days, it is not commonly heard. The Bobwhite quail ranges up and down the east coast and throughout the eastern portion of the country to Wisconsin and Texas. Over the last thirty years, though, their populations have plummeted as agricultural practices have intensified and taken over the grassy field buffers and woody thickets that once provided ideal habitat for quail.

In Maryland, populations of these birds have declined ninety percent during the past several decades. Such reductions are blamed on a loss of habitat combined with the short life-span of the fowl. Out of every 100 Bobwhite that are alive in the fall following their breeding season, typically 75-80 will perish over the next twelve months. When their basic needs of cover, food, and shelter disappear, the birds are unable to reproduce. One poor year can result in a large population decline. Several bad years in a row will decimate their numbers.

Back in June we had the pleasure of visiting Duvall Farm, located between Easton and Oxford, and it was unlike any farm either of us had toured. Instead of fields of beans or corn stretching across the landscape, three large, stepped, shallow ponds fringed with wetland plants and filled with ducks contour the land. Surrounding the ponds are meadows of warm season grasses bordered by brush piles and thickets that provide perfect habitat for Bobwhite. The wetlands and ponds are nature's filters. The rainwater that falls on the farm flows into each pond successively before entering Trippe's Creek. As we learned from Chip Akridge, the owner of Duvall, and as one might expect, the water leaving the farm and running into the creek is clear and clean. Oysters are thriving in the waterway near this flow. Wildlife and waterfowl are abundant. And numerous coveys of Bobwhite explode from the bush.

Many of our conservancy members own acreage that borders the water, and several of them have asked us to walk their property to assist them in finding ways to improve natural habitat and become better river stewards. Over the past several months while conducting these *Stewardship Surveys* we have helped owners with ways to address issues such as shoreline erosion, the control of invasive species (such as *Phragmites*), the overabundance of lawn grass, the need for natural buffers, and the possibilities for restoring habitat. Tall grass and thickets are just the type of habitat that the Bobwhite need and once established, these meadows require far less maintenance than turf grass. With an interspersed of wildflowers and shrubs—an enticement for butterflies and hummingbirds—these meadows provide a natural beauty that turf grass cannot approach.

Regarding land presently used for agricultural purposes, funds are available through USDA conservation programs to pay for up to eighty-five percent of the cost of converting fields to habitat. Additionally, landowners receive a yearly rental fee. Other programs are available for those with property not actively farmed. Visit our website at www.crebconservancy.org and contact us if you are interested in learning more about conservation initiatives that you can implement on your property—ones that will help filter water, reduce nutrient loading into our rivers, and provide habitat to attract wildlife.

- Tim Junkin is the Executive of the Choptank River Eastern Bay Conservancy, headquartered in St. Michaels.