

Creating Better Quail Habitat on

Navy Land

NAS Kingsville Partnership Offers More Opportunities for Hunters

The U.S. Navy's Escondido Ranch, just outside of Freer, TX is the site of a new quail habitat, thanks to a partnership between the Navy and the South Texas Chapter of Quail Unlimited (QU). Starting in the fall of 2007 through the creation of a better habitat, Service members will be able to continue to enjoy the experience of hunting in South Texas at a fraction of the cost of hunting on private land.

Background

In September 2006, Naval Air Station (NAS) Kingsville, TX committed funds from its Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) Department's hunting program to improve and enhance habitat for quail at the Escondido Ranch, a 6,800-acre Navy-owned facility in southwestern McMullen County, TX. The South Texas Chapter of QU also provided matching funds to support this project.

Prior to beginning work, Navy biologist Rich Riddle and local QU personnel conducted site visits to determine the appropriate best management practices and identify locations on the ranch that would benefit from the creation of quail habitat. As much as 85 percent of the ranch was dominated by heavy brush, leaving few open areas to support good quail populations. It was determined that mechanical brush chopping, using a Lawson aerator to create soil disturbance in combination with prescribed fire, would produce the best results.

To date, about 600 acres of mixed brush has been chopped and another 900 acres were burned by professional fire crews from The Nature Conservancy and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Together, these land use practices have greatly improved the habitat for quail by creating edge effects and increasing annual forb production (native vegetation). These practices also benefit other game

species such as deer, turkey, dove and javalina. In February 2007, a late-winter helicopter survey of the ranch conducted by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department showed that the treated areas were already being heavily utilized by many species of wildlife.

Long-Term Drought Can Threaten Quail Populations

Mother Nature has also cooperated with the efforts of the team. Although 2005 and much of 2006 experienced a prolonged drought in South Texas, the area began receiving rains in the latter part of 2006 that continued through the summer of 2007. In conjunction with the prescribed fires and mechanical brush chopping, the rain has contributed to the explosive growth of annual forbs in the spring and summer of 2007. This vegetation is an excellent food source for the bobwhite and scaled quail found on the property. Additionally, the debris created by the brush chopping provides loafing cover and protection from predators.

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desirable state for quail. For 2007, the NAS Kingsville MWR Department and the QU South Texas Chapter have again pledged funding for additional mechanical brush treatment. More burning and chemical treatments will be needed in successive years to suppress re-growth of woody brush species.

A Hidden Gem

Escondido means “hidden” in Spanish, and true to its name, the Escondido Ranch is an often-overlooked resource in South Texas. The ranch is located approximately 25 miles northwest of Freer, in the southwest corner of McMullen County on land owned by the Navy. It is adjacent to the “Dixie” Target Site of the McMullen Range Complex, an active air-to-ground

gunnery and bombing range used for training naval aviators.

Managed by the MWR Department of NAS Kingsville, the ranch offers a South Texas hunting experience for members of the military community. Although its primary customers are active duty military, the ranch is also open to military retirees and Department of Defense civilian employees. Escondido Ranch has also been host to outside groups such as the South Texas Star Gazers, local Boy Scouts, and the Christian Outdoor Coalition, a nonprofit group of inner-city youth who assisted with a special doe-only management hunt. The ranch is also used as a study site by local universities conducting graduate-level research on plants, wildlife and South Texas ecosystems.

A 17-room ranch lodge has accommodations for more than 50 guests, including an adjacent cookhouse that contains four large barbecue pits, two electric stoves, and an electric grill. The lodge has a large open lounge area with sofas, tables, large-screen television, DVD player, and more. Each room is furnished with a refrigerator, alarm clock, and an air conditioner/heater, but limited water availability prevents the ranch from providing linen service. The recent addition of one- and two-bedroom travel homes will add to the comfort and capacity of the ranch. Future plans include the purchase of handicapped-accessible hunting blinds for disabled veterans.

The Escondido Ranch also offers hunting opportunities for deer, feral hogs, javalinas, turkey and dove. Driving times from Kingsville, Corpus Christi, and San Antonio, are approximately 1.5, 2 and 2.5 hours, respectively. Reservations and the most current hunting information may be obtained by calling the Escondido Ranch at 830-373-4419. [↕](#)



Prescribed burning operations were conducted with the assistance of professional fire crews from The Nature Conservancy and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Photo by Rich Riddle

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