

ONTARIO FEDERATION OF ANGLERS & HUNTERS



Ontario Conservation Centre

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Recovery Planning
Environment and Climate Change Canada
15th Floor, Place Vincent Massey
351 St. Joseph Boulevard
Gatineau, Quebec
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Dear Sir/Madam:

Subject: Recovery Strategy for the Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) in Canada [Proposed]

On behalf of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH), its 100,000 members, subscribers and supporters, and 740 member clubs, we have reviewed the draft Recovery Strategy for the Northern Bobwhite and submit the following comments for consideration.

General Comments

The northern bobwhite is a tremendously valuable game species that continues to support our hunting heritage despite extensive range retraction and population declines. Game bird hunting preserves provide important opportunities for upland bird hunters, including the ability to train and use highly specialized bird dogs. Due to its value as a game bird, the northern bobwhite has been extensively studied in the United States. This body of research and the conservation efforts of groups like Quail Forever provides us with the tools and knowledge that we need to recover this valuable species in the wild – we just need the willpower to act.

Like the successful restoration of the wild turkey, the recovery of northern bobwhite is a prime opportunity to engage the public and interested stakeholders groups in stewardship and habitat restoration activities. Ontario currently has an abundance of partners and programs focused on conserving and improving the grassland and early successional habitat required by northern bobwhite – ALUS Canada, Tallgrass Ontario, the provincial Grasslands Stewardship Initiative, the Species at Risk Stewardship Fund, the federal Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk, and the Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program, to name a few. Engagement and stewardship focused on northern bobwhite will benefit many ecosystems and species, including other species at risk.

Mainland restoration of northern bobwhite will require significant private land stewardship, and this engagement can be jumpstarted through many of the partners mentioned above who work directly with farmers and other landowners.

The recovery of northern bobwhite is a daunting task, and is entirely dependent on direct involvement and stewardship from Walpole Island First Nation (WIFN); simply put, without their involvement, the northern bobwhite is at significant risk of being extirpated from Canada. Involvement from the Indigenous community will be required to identify, protect, and restore critical habitat, permit population assessment and monitoring, and manage predation. We understand that WIFN has already done extensive habitat-related work to reverse biodiversity loss (e.g. Walpole Island Land Trust) and we applaud them. The recovery of northern bobwhite presents an opportunity to build on these existing stewardship activities.

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Recovery Priorities

The recovery of any species at risk requires knowledge of population size. We agree that population assessment and monitoring should be an immediate priority. At current habitat levels, what is the carrying capacity for northern bobwhite on Walpole Island?

In our opinion, the ultimate goal should be to restore self-sustaining populations of wild northern bobwhite on both Walpole Island and the mainland. Restoration on the mainland will require a sustainable population on Walpole Island as a source of birds. As such, we believe that restoration of northern bobwhites on Walpole Island, including the protection and restoration of habitat, is the highest priority. However, we also recommend that the MNRF engage the public, landowners, and stakeholder groups to identify areas of the mainland where suitable habitat exists or can be restored to provide candidate sites for species restoration efforts (e.g. release). Assuming we are successful at restoring the northern bobwhite population on Walpole Island (i.e. supporting a potential source stock), how many birds would need to be released on the mainland in a pilot release to maximize the odds of successful establishment? How much high quality habitat would be required at this pilot release site to support these birds in the short term?

Domestic cats have been shown to be a significant threat to many bird species, including northern bobwhite. In recent years, feral cat populations are even being augmented in many areas of the northern bobwhite's range by feeding and trap-neuter-return programs. Northern bobwhite can serve as "poster species" to illustrate the ecological threat that unmanaged domestic and feral cat populations can have on our biodiversity, including species at risk. For instance, Norfolk County has been the target of past habitat restoration efforts and could be a candidate location for bobwhite restoration efforts. However, Norfolk County is also home to approximately 30,000 feral cats which are estimated to kill between 750,000 and 1.9 million birds annually (Blancher 2013). The OFAH recommends that the recovery strategy should include strategies to minimize the impacts of predators on northern bobwhite, such as a public education and awareness campaign on the ecological threats of domestic and feral cats. More specifically, we recommend that the governments of Ontario, Canada, and Walpole Island First Nation identify areas of Walpole Island that are suitable for a targeted predator control program with the goal of helping existing bobwhite populations reach critical mass.

Thank you for considering our concerns. We would appreciate responses to the questions posed above, as this will determine the feasibility of restoring northern bobwhite on the mainland, and better inform the OFAH on when and how we can contribute to these efforts.

Yours in Conservation,



Mark Ryckman
Manager of Policy

MR/gh

cc: OFAH Board of Directors
OFAH Small Game Advisory Committee
Angelo Lombardo, OFAH Executive Director
Matt DeMille, OFAH Manager, Fish & Wildlife Services
OFAH Fish & Wildlife Staff

Literature Cited:

Blancher, P. 2013. Estimated number of birds killed by house cats (*Felis catus*) in Canada. *Avian Conservation and Ecology* 8(2): 3. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5751/ACE-00557-080203>