

# ONTARIO FEDERATION OF ANGLERS & HUNTERS



*Ontario Conservation Centre*

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Ms. Fiona McGuiness  
Species at Risk Recovery Section  
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K9J 3C7

Dear Ms. McGuiness:

Subject: ERO 019-0189 Draft Recovery Strategy for Northern Bobwhite in Ontario

The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) is Ontario's largest non-profit, conservation-based organization representing 100,000 members, subscribers, and supporters, and 740 member clubs. We have reviewed the draft Recovery Strategy for Northern Bobwhite in Ontario, 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, northern bobwhite recovery can benefit from hunters that are already engaged in conservation activities. Like the successful restoration of the wild turkey, the recovery of northern bobwhite is a prime opportunity to engage the public and interested stakeholder 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 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.

In our opinion, the ultimate goal should be to restore self-sustaining populations of wild northern bobwhite on not only Walpole Island, but also the mainland. Mainland restoration of northern bobwhite will require significant private land stewardship and a sustainable population on Walpole Island to act as a source population. Landowner 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). 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.

## Recovery Strategy

### Habitat

The recovery strategy indicates that the ability for the current population of northern bobwhite to sustain itself and to then increase in abundance is unknown. As this is the only source population for Ontario, due to genetic divergence from neighbouring jurisdictions, it is essential to complete a population assessment to determine feasibility of restoration. Is the population large enough to effectively reach carrying capacity on Walpole Island on its own? Is the maximum population on Walpole Island large enough to use to repopulate areas of the mainland?

As habitat loss has been one of the largest factors in northern bobwhite populations declines, the OFAH believes the protection of existing and suitable habitat should be the highest priority. Taking a precautionary approach by protecting 400m radius areas around all verified northern bobwhite sightings since 1999 will ensure that known viable habitat is preserved. After a population assessment, any areas that are suitable habitat but don't have bobwhites, should be priority sites to increase connectivity to existing coveys. Throughout this process MECP should 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. Has any consideration been given to the number of birds and quality of mainland habitat that would be required for the establishment of a mainland population?

The recovery strategy indicated that European Common Reed (Phragmites) is also a high priority threat to northern bobwhite habitat. Phragmites management and removal is a long and intensive undertaking that requires an integrated pest management approach including cutting, burning, and the use of herbicides. In areas where Phragmites threatens northern bobwhite habitat, MECP needs to take thorough measures to ensure that it is actively managed if there is any hope to actually improve habitat. Additionally, to effectively utilize herbicide, a Pest Management Regulatory Agency label expansion would be required (either permanently or through an emergency expansion). Phragmites control efforts done in Rondeau Bay Provincial Park would be a key case study to determine the efficacy of Phragmites removal on Walpole Island.

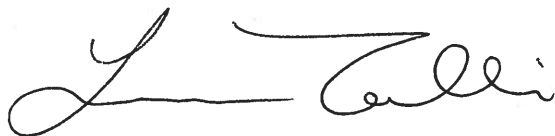
### Predation

Domestic cats have been shown to be a significant threat to many bird species, including northern bobwhite. In recent years, feral cat populations have been augmented in many areas of the northern bobwhite range by feeding and trap-neuter-return programs. Northern bobwhite can serve as a "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.

A key piece that is missing from this recovery strategy is the absence of wild pig or feral swine in regard to predation pressures on northern bobwhite. Ontario is facing an increasing threat from invasive wild pigs becoming established and spreading throughout the province. Nesting success of bobwhite has been shown to be negatively impacted by wild pigs across the United States (Bevins et al. 2014). Without a tangible management plan to eradicate wild pigs from Ontario, any recovery efforts for northern bobwhite would be functionally useless. The OFAH recommends that the Ontario government actively removes any and all wild pigs that are present in the province.

Thank you for considering our comments. The OFAH and our member clubs look forward to contributing to the restoration of northern bobwhite, if and when it is feasible to do so.

Yours in Conservation



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LT/jb

cc: OFAH Board of Directors  
OFAH Small Game Advisory Committee  
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References

Bevins, S. N., Pedersen, K., Lutman, M. W., Gidlewski, T., & Deliberto, T. J. (2014). Consequences associated with the recent range expansion of nonnative feral swine. *Bioscience*, 64(4), 291-299.

Blancher, P. (2013). Estimated number of birds killed by house cats (*Felis catus*) in Canada. *Avian Conservation and Ecology*, 8(2).