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## **BIRDS GONE WILD; With the proper upbringing, farm-raised quail act as unruly as those found in nature**

By Aaron Kuriloff; Staff writer

The covey broke from the hillside in a rush of wings and wheeled back through the hunting party so quickly that no one fired a shot.

Carey Bruner, with his mouth open and his safety still on, watched the dozen-odd quail vanish into a tree-lined wash. Stephen Jenkins, the quail hunting enthusiast and guide who had raised each of the birds from the egg, cackled through a mouthful of chewing tobacco.

"I should have warned you guys, these ain't no sitting ducks," he said. "These are real wild birds. Or as close to a real wild bird population as you are going to get nowadays."

On their 200-acre spread north of Covington, Jenkins and his three best friends are trying to re-create a lifestyle and an avian population that many had presumed lost to development.

About two decades ago, when Jenkins was growing up, the low hills of St. Tammany Parish, like much of the pine uplands and pasture land in the Southeast, served as home territory to millions of bobwhite quail. The fields near his home allowed Jenkins and his friends, like thousands of others throughout the region, to spend dozens of afternoons each year strolling through the low scrub with shotguns on their arms, waiting for the dogs to point.

But suburban sprawl replaced the pea-patch farms that once dominated the region and provided habitat for the quail. Trapped on a shrinking range, quail began to suffer precipitous declines, while Jenkins and his friends, deprived of the vacant lots and open fields where hunting had been permitted, found their hunting reduced to one trip per year, an eight-hour drive away, in Texas.

It was at the tail end of one particularly unsuccessful trip, in a car full of drooling dogs and unwashed hunters, when they brainstormed the idea: Buy some land close to home, raise birds and release them throughout the area, and pay for the expense by charging friends to hunt there.

"We used to hunt these exact fields when we were kids," Jenkins said. "We just wanted other people to have the same opportunity."

That opportunity comes with plenty of effort. As they researched quail, the foursome quickly learned that raising birds for hunting had some inherent obstacles. Obtaining quail eggs and hatching birds, they knew, wasn't very difficult. But others had found that young quail quickly became accustomed to humans, meaning they didn't flush at the approach of gunmen or dogs, or worse, flew closer hoping for a snack.

"We wanted hard-flying, good birds," he said. "It's no fun if you come out here and it's not a challenge."

### Nature vs. nurture

To raise birds that would behave like wild quail, they needed to hatch chicks in as wild an environment as possible. To that end, they constructed a series of what enthusiasts call "flight pens." These are essentially giant cages with enough room for the birds to practice flying. The Mississippi State University Agricultural Extension Service recommends two feet of space per bird. Jenkins' pens measure 30 feet by 100 feet each.

"We can raise about 8,000 birds at a time," he said.

When the birds hatch, after spending time in a series of incubators, they go into the pens, Jenkins said. The operators take time to protect them from predators such as "coyotes, coons, minks, bobcats, hawks and the common house cat," as Jeff Macgee, one of Jenkins' partners put it. Raising them to the size of a baseball requires lots of care.

"A quail comes out of the egg looking for a way to die," Jenkins said. "Blow on them wrong, and it could kill them."

But the birds get stronger as they age. After a few weeks, all contact with humans is essentially cut off. Water and food come into the pens through automatic feeding systems. Aside from occasional inspection visits, the birds almost never see people.

The result: birds that flee from humans and gun dogs as vigorously as an quail hatched in the wild, Jenkins said.

The promise of such birds has attracted a growing clientele to Wing Hollow, as the men call their operation. Quail hunting is a traditionally aristocratic pastime, subject of innumerable barroom watercolors, a sport favored by pipe-smoking men with deerstalkers and crack-barreled shotguns.

Some fat cats, no fat dogs

A facility like Wing Hollow helps democratize the sport, Jenkins said, and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries manages some public lands for quail (see their Web site [www.wlf.state.la.us](http://www.wlf.state.la.us)), but most of his clients are wealthy, and many trips are business-related.

"Thanks for buying \$2 million worth of drill stem from us last year," he said. "It's that type of stuff."

What those businessmen find, however, is an experience that's as close to Jenkins' north shore childhood as possible. Before setting out, Jenkins has one of the other guides release the birds into the field, so that even he doesn't know where the coveys have gathered. Then he sends Mel and Cindy, English pointers, both descendants of a bloodline that Jenkins has been breeding since youth, out after them.

The dogs are professionals. They hunt almost all day, every day, throughout the four-month winter season.

"There's not an ounce of body fat on these dogs," he said. "There are no fat dogs in my house."

The hunters just followed behind the dogs, watching the pair work. After a few minutes, both froze, tails erect, one paw lifted in a classic point, aimed at a tiny shrub that seemed too small to shelter anything much larger than a robin.

As the humans moved into position behind the dogs, the birds broke, tumbling into the air and fleeing in all directions. The guns thundered, but hit nothing. The hunters collapsed in gales of laughter.

"Last time I hunted at a quail farm, the birds just flew about five feet in the air and set right back down," one said. "These ones are a lot more skittish. Not that they have anything to fear from me, apparently."

That type of comment makes all the time spent raising the birds worthwhile, Jenkins said. He recommends hunters bring at least five boxes of inexpensive shot with them on a trip. Fast-moving quail have a way of making people burn through ammunition. But unpredictability is a highly sought characteristic.

"Sometimes they flush all at once," he said. "Sometimes they flush one at a time. Sometimes they get up and head for another county right away. Sometimes they go about 50 yards and go right back down. I can't control the birds. But that's just the way we want them."