

# Life History of the Northern Bobwhite Quail

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**DESCRIPTION:** One subspecies of northern bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) occurs in Alabama. Adult bobwhites weigh about 6 ounces and prefer walking to flying. Males have a distinct white throat patch and mask, whereas the female is buff colored. A density of one bird per acre is high.



**REPRODUCTION:** Females lay 11-14 eggs between April and September and incubate the clutch for 23 days. The female may lay three clutches a nesting season if earlier attempts are unsuccessful. Occasionally males incubate the nest so the female may raise another clutch. During the first 12-14 days, chicks are not able to fly and about 1/3 of the chicks survive to one month old. Nesting success is 20-40%.

**HABITAT:** Quail have basic habitat requirements for survival: water, food, cover, and space.

- Quail generally meet their water needs through dew, foods and metabolic water produced during digestion. Puddles, ponds and creeks are usually not required.
- Nests are made of dead grasses and litter. Vegetation disturbance every 2 – 3 years helps maintain suitable nesting habitat. Nests are often located near abundant summer food sources, e.g. blackberries, so less time is away from the nest.
- Chicks need a high protein diet during the first 10 weeks of life, which includes invertebrates such as beetles, grasshoppers, ants and spiders. Maintaining areas in brood habitat is essential. Soil disturbance, every 1 – 2 years, is necessary to maintain adequate brood rearing habitat.
- Dense stands, grown-up fence rows and ditch banks create escape cover for avoiding predators. Interspersed cover among feeding areas provides the best protection.
- During moderate weather conditions, roosting cover of sparse vegetation about two feet tall and open overhead is adequate. In severe weather, dense cover such as honeysuckle thickets or shrubs reduces effects of wind or rain. Roosting sites are often located near feeding areas.

**DIETS:** Northern bobwhites are opportunistic granivores whose diet varies according to seasonal foods. Female bobwhites consume higher quantities of invertebrates than males during breeding season, and higher quantities are consumed by both sexes in the summer as opposed to the winter. Beggarweeds, ragweeds, lespedezas, partridge peas, panicgrasses and blackberries are desired foods.

**DISEASES:** Northern bobwhites are susceptible to protozoan, viral and bacterial diseases with avian pox being the most frequently encountered disease. They are also infested with a variety of ectoparasites and endoparasites such as ticks, mites, lice, chiggers, trematodes and cestodes.

Photo Credit: Jeff Vanuga, USDA NRCS, [www.forestryimages.org](http://www.forestryimages.org)



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