



Producing QUAIL for Home Consumption

Fred D. Thornberry*

Hobby and backyard producers are becoming more interested in producing quail for home consumption. Tasty and known for their gourmet quality, quail are inexpensive to produce and require little space.

The bobwhite is the best known quail and preferred by many consumers. However, the large strains of coturnix (Japanese) quail have become popular. These birds are larger,

hardier and reach slaughter weight much earlier than most bobwhite strains. Texas A&M University researchers have developed a heavily muscled, light-fleshed coturnix strain that attains a live weight of 10 to 13 ounces at slaughter age of 7 weeks. Smaller coturnix strains yield small, dark-fleshed carcasses less desirable as a gourmet item.

Maintaining a breeder flock is usually not practical or economically feasible for the occasional producer, who can buy chicks or hatching eggs at reasonable cost from reputable game-

*Professor and Extension Specialist, Texas A&M University

bird breeding farms operating under the National Poultry Improvement Plan. A local county Extension agent or the Texas A&M University Poultry Science Department (409/845-4319) can suggest sources of meat-type quail chicks or hatching eggs.

Housing and brooding

Producing meat quail for home use does not require expensive, elaborate housing or equipment. Producers need:

- A clean, dry structure that can be properly heated and ventilated and that protects chicks from cold, rain and predators;
- Recommended maximum floor space of six chicks per square foot the first two weeks, four per square foot for weeks two through six, and three per square foot after six weeks;
- If housing has wire side-walls, a wire size small enough to prevent escape;
- A gas or electric brooder or infrared heat lamps; and
- Feeding and watering equipment.

An adjustable plastic side-wall curtain can be used to restrain young chicks and help maintain heat effectively.

Proper brooding temperature is vital during the first four weeks. Chilling or over-

heating kills young chicks. Temperature at chick level should be 95 to 97 degrees F the first week. The temperature can be reduced 5 degrees per week until 75 degrees is reached and chicks are fully feathered. If using infrared heat lamps, three 125-watt bulbs placed 18 to 20 inches above the floor are sufficient to brood 250 chicks. Secure lamps so they cannot fall to the floor and create a fire hazard.

A thermometer reading may not accurately indicate infrared heat. A good guide for temperature control is chick behavior. Chicks piling or crowding near the heat source are too cold. Overheated chicks move away from the heat source. Comfortable chicks generally scatter about the pen.

At least two weeks before chicks arrive, clean and disinfect the quail house and equipment. Use a commercial disinfectant labeled for use in poultry houses. Surfaces must be clean before they can be disinfected.

Be prepared for chicks at least 2 days before they arrive. Place 2 to 4 inches of wood shavings or rice hulls on the floor. Never place chicks on a slick surface such as cardboard, plastic or newspaper. Use a brooder guard the first week to circle the brooder and keep chicks near food, water and heat. The guard should be about 18 inches tall and 5 to 7 feet in diameter.

Nutrition

For the first 6 weeks, quail chicks must receive a fresh, high-quality game-bird starter feed containing 26 to 30 percent protein. Inform the feed dealer at least 2 weeks before chicks arrive so that fresh feed can be ordered. A 20 percent game bird grower can be fed after quail are 6 weeks old.

During the first week of brooding, reduce feed particle size to a uniform "cornmeal" consistency to prevent starve-outs. A coffee grinder or blender can be used for this purpose.

Start chicks by piling the finely ground feed on cookie sheets, pans or shallow box lids. After 7 days, chicks are large enough to eat from the tube feeders. One 30-pound feeder can provide enough feed for 100 quail for several days. Three to three and a half pounds of feed per quail will be required during the feeding period. Never let quail run out of feed or water.

To prevent leg problems, quail need adequate vitamin levels. Add inexpensive, water-soluble poultry vitamins to the drinking water the first 2 weeks to make sure the chicks receive enough vitamins. **Do not** exceed the recommended dosage. Supplemental feed-stuffs such as grain are unnecessary and may retard growth or create health problems.

Jug-type waterers are commonly used for small numbers of chicks or older quail. Rinse and sanitize the waterers

daily. Place pebbles in troughs the first 7 days to prevent chicks from getting wet or drowning. One one-gallon waterer per 100 chicks is usually enough through 2 weeks of age. Then provide two or more one-gallon waterers per 100 quail.

Nipple game-bird waterers are often used for large groups of quail. Check nipple height closely and adjust it as the quail grow. Birds must be able to trigger nipples easily.

Lighting

Provide a bright light (100-watt bulb) in addition to brooder lights for the first 3 days to help chicks find feed and water. After 3 days, maintain chicks on low-intensity light to minimize cannibalism. Continuous lighting increases growth by allowing chicks to feed and drink at all times.

Cannibalism

Quail can peck and cannibalize each other. Preventive measures include beak snubbing (clipping the tip of the top beak), using low-intensity or red light, increasing floor space and improving ventilation. To help stop cannibalism, use Vicks salve or an anti-peck solution available at most feed stores, and place clumps of tree foliage or leafy alfalfa hay in the pen.

Health

Quail are vulnerable to many of the same diseases and parasites affecting domestic

poultry. Isolation rearing and rigid sanitation practices are the best protection against disease and parasite problems:

- Keep poultry, rodents, and wild birds away from quail.
- Eliminate fly resting and breeding sites or treat with an insecticide approved for use in poultry houses.
- Clean waterers daily and remove wet or spilled feed.
- Remove dead birds immediately and isolate sick and unthrifty birds.
- Obtain a veterinary diagnosis if possible before medicating birds. Local feed stores usually carry poultry medications effective against coccidiosis, enteritis and respiratory infections.

Slaughter

Quail should be slaughtered as soon as they reach optimum size. Remove feed and water 4 to 6 hours before slaughter to minimize carcass contamination during processing.

At slaughter, birds are killed and bled, then either scalded and plucked, or slit down the back and skinned. In either case, viscera — including lungs, kidneys, crop, neck and tail head — are removed. The dressing percentage for quail is about 72 percent of live weight.

Carcasses are washed thoroughly, then placed in an ice-water slush bath to cool for at least two hours before being frozen for home use. Place carcasses in frozen food containers and cover with water. Press containers to expel air before closing. Quail frozen this way are protected from freezer burn and retain quality for 9 to 12 months.

More detailed information on slaughtering and freezing is available from Extension publication B-1383, "Processing Poultry at Home," and L-5090, "Freezing Poultry for Home Use."

Use

Quail are versatile and can be prepared in many ways. Most popular are grilling, broiling and deep frying.

FRIED QUAIL

8 quail

1 cup white wine

1 to 1 1/2 teaspoons garlic salt

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

1/4 teaspoon thyme

Peanut oil

1 1/2 cup flour

Wash quail, then slit carcasses down the back. Remove backbone and ribs, and flatten carcasses. Combine wine, salt, pepper and thyme. Heat oil. Dip quail in wine and seasoning solution, then roll in flour and immediately place in hot oil. Fry until sides are a light golden brown. Strain cooking oil and use drippings to make gravy.

Serve with buttered corn-bread, baked sweet potatoes and onions baked in foil with white wine and soy sauce. Serves 4.

BROILED QUAIL

8 quail

1 cup Italian dressing

1 to 1¹/₂ teaspoons garlic salt

1/4 teaspoon thyme

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

1 to 1¹/₂ cups white wine

Wash quail. Combine dressing, salt, thyme and black pepper, and mix well. Dip quail in solution and place in broiling pan (breast up). Attach aluminum foil twists to leg ends and place pan under broiler.

Broil until carcasses brown lightly. Add wine and remaining dressing mix to pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 15 to 20 minutes or until leg bone will twist in joint. Baste frequently with liquid in pan. Lay foil across quail if necessary to prevent excess browning.

Serve with rice-wild rice mixture, asparagus and green salad. Serves 4.

GRILLED QUAIL

8 quail

2 cups Italian dressing

1 teaspoon garlic salt

1/4 teaspoon thyme

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Wash quail. Combine dressing, salt, thyme and black pepper,

and mix well. Attach aluminum foil twists to leg ends and submerge quail in dressing solution.

Place quail over charcoal and grill (20 to 25 minutes) until leg bone will twist in joint. Turn quail and baste frequently with dressing mix.

Serve with pintos cooked with bacon ends in crock pot, potato salad and fresh yeast bread.

Serves 4.

Quail pictured in photograph courtesy of Royers Cafe, College Station, TX.

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