

When quail season opens Saturday, hunters in most parts of the state will feel like theyâ€™ve stepped back in time â€” not all the way back to the good old days, but at least back to about 2005-06. That was a pretty good quail season â€” well, unless you were Dick Cheney or Harry Wittington, but letâ€™s not relive that episode. The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservationâ€™s upland game biologist is happy with the quail outlook this year, as well. â€œI think I took over this job at just the right time (in 2013) after years of sustained drought we had nowhere to go but up,â€• Scott Cox said lightheartedly. Indeed, results of roadside quail surveys completed in August showed a 66 percent increase from 2013 â€” a 76.3 percent increase over 2012. Those percentages are huge â€” and that quail numbers still are only moderate is an indication of just what Cox meant when he said â€œnowhere to go but up.â€• Regionally, the percentage increases from 2013 are 94 percent in the Northcentral and Southeast, 71 percent in the Northwest, 57 percent in the Northeast and 50 percent in Southwest. Southcentral had the only negative result, but it was off significantly at 50 percent. Quail populations are monitored and indexed using annual roadside surveys in August and October. This is the 25th year for the surveys. Department employees survey 83 routes of 20 miles each in all counties except Oklahoma and Tulsa. Larger counties like Beaver, Ellis, LeFlore, McCurtain, Osage, Pittsburg and Roger Mills have two routes. Cox cautions that the index is still 31 percent below the 25-year average â€” and old timers will say Oklahomaâ€™s prime quail years pre-date 25 years ago â€” but on the positive side he points out that 2014 was the second model year in a row with good precipitation and weather conditions suitable for quail nesting and rearing periods. â€œThis year theyâ€™ve completed nesting and rearing in September, and in October they started sitting back enjoying the fruits of what Mother Nature has provided in good cover and food sources,â€• he said. Season opens Saturday and runs through Feb. 15, with a daily bag limit of

10 birds per day. Cox said hunters with good pointing dogs who typically are successful should find better success this year. "I would expect in good reproduction areas they will move five to 10 coveys a day," he said. Improved reproduction and survival statewide are mirrored in results playing out on intensive quail population research areas at the Packsaddle and Beaver River Wildlife Management areas, Cox said. "Every year we see differences in the surveys and that is due mostly to weather and land use, livestock grazing, clean agriculture, fire or lack of fire, habitat," he said. In Cox's annual outlook he reports that issues explored in the research projects, underway since 2011, are multi-faceted and include habitat studies, relationships between quail and weather, movement and survival of radio-marked adult quail and chicks, thermal modeling, refining methods of determining abundance, burning and grazing, predation, and possible affects of Aflatoxins on quail and other wildlife species. "Quail nesting, reproduction, population, habitat, conditions and other biological aspects are increasing habitat is favorable," the report states. Whatever the surveys and reports indicate, the real test begins Saturday as hunters hit the fields and cover more ground than wildlife staff could hope to cover. Hunters are invited to share their field reports, and photos, on the department's Facebook page at facebook.com/wildlifedepartment.