Developing a Habitat Suitability Index Model for Masked Bobwhite

Progress Report

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Background and Introduction

Since the initial discovery of masked bobwhite in 1864 and subsequent description in 1884, the species has had a tenuous history. Masked bobwhite were thought to be extirpated in southern Arizona by 1900 and believed extinct in Sonora, Mexico by 1950. Three isolated, wild populations were subsequently re-discovered in Sonora between 1964 and 1992, one or two of which are thought to have since disappeared. During the past 10 years, only two populations were known to exist in the wild, one on the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge (BANWR) and one on several private ranches in north-central Sonora, Mexico. Numbers of birds in these two areas have declined in recent years and no birds were detected in either location during the 2009 standardized survey effort (although BANWR staff reported several incidental detections of birds in 2009).

The last four decades of masked bobwhite recovery efforts have had limited success. The sole population in the U.S. (at BANWR) required annual supplementation of captive-reared individuals. The sole wild population in Mexico is: 1) small, and possibly extirpated, 2) adversely affected by over-grazing by livestock and planting of buffelgrass, and 3) likely dependent on more intensive conservation or habitat management efforts. Successful recovery of the species will likely require a concerted, international collaborative effort between the United States and Mexico. The Masked Bobwhite Recovery Plan suggests a habitat suitability analysis to guide habitat management and bobwhite reintroduction efforts in the U.S. and Mexico. Masked bobwhite recovery is therefore dependent upon synthesizing masked bobwhite habitat requirements, identifying areas with remaining habitat, and managing existing habitat to improve habitat suitability. Unfortunately, traditional methods of developing and testing a habitat suitability index model are not feasible because of the virtual lack of wild birds. Moreover, results from a habitat suitability investigation on birds occupying sub-optimal habitat could lead to incorrectly identifying poor habitat as optimal. In order to overcome these obstacles, we are pursuing a novel method which incorporates both published literature and expert opinion to develop a suite of habitat suitability index models for Masked Bobwhite.

Habitat suitability index models were introduced by the fish and wildlife in 1981 to better evaluate fish and wildlife habitat needs

Project Objectives

Our three primary goals for this project are: 1) Determine important habitat features for masked bobwhite; 2) Quantify the explicit relationship between these important habitat features and habitat suitability for masked bobwhite; and 3) Translate the various bivariate relationships between habitat features and habitat suitability into a suite of mathematical habitat suitability models.

Progress to Date

*Objective 1*. We identified 12 species experts and asked them if they were willing to meet with us for one-on-one interviews to provide their knowledge of masked bobwhite habitat suitability. Three of the experts we contacted did not respond to multiple requests for an interview (G. Camou, E. Gomez, and J. Levy). We used the following questions to aid in collecting information about masked bobwhite habitat from the remaining 9 experts.

* What has prevented masked bobwhite from establishing or recovering?
* What are the most important habitat variables for masked bobwhite?
* How does season (time of year) affect these variables and their importance?

The 9 experts identified 22 separate issues that they suggested affects masked bobwhite recovery. We removed 2 of these issues (breeding problems among the released birds and ability of captive birds to survive in the wild) because they were unrelated (or only very peripherally related) to habitat suitability. The remaining issues are a combination of measurable habitat features and ultimate processes that affect habitat selection (e.g., leguminous shrubs and winter food, respectively). We also asked experts to rank each variable in order of importance. The variables and their associated ranks are presented in Table 1. As might be expected, not all experts mentioned (and hence ranked) the same suite of variables. Whenever an expert failed to rank a variable that was mentioned by other experts, we inferred a rank from discussions within the interview. We left the column for rank blank if the variable was not discussed in enough detail by the expert to infer a rank. We summarized the overall importance of each variable (among all 9 experts) by taking an average of the ranks for each variable. We calculated variable weights by taking the inverse of the average rank (Table 2).

*Objective 2*. We initially selected 5 variables which were also present in the published literature to identify the quantitative relationship between each variable and habitat suitability for masked bobwhite: 1) Woody cover (brush and shrub), 2) Bare ground, 3) Nest substrate height, 4) Herbaceous cover, and 5) Visual obstruction (at ground level). We used means (and ranges) of variables from our interviews with species experts and from the published literature to produce a suite of potential relationships for each variable. In cases where we were given a mean but no range we produced three graphs with varying degrees of variance: high, medium, and low. Graphs with high variance would indicate suitability for masked bobwhite over a broad range of conditions. Conversely, graphs with low variance would indicate only a narrow range of habitat conditions are suitable for masked bobwhite. In cases where we were given a range but no mean, we created graphs with varying levels of kurtosis (skew) to create various means (low, centered, and high) within a given range. The number of graphs produced for each variable reflects either the degree of uncertainty about the relationship, or the diversity of opinions among species experts, or both. Graphs of the 5 initial variables, along with their probability density functions are presented in Appendix A. We will continue this process for the remaining variables until we have summarized the experts’ opinions regarding the relationships between all of the important habitat features and habitat suitability for masked bobwhite.

*Objective 3.* Only 6 of the 9 species experts agreed to assist with this objective. One expert stated they would have no information outside of the published literature (Kuvleski), another expert took issue with our methodology and decided not to participate (Brown), and another no longer works at BANWR (Hunnicut). We incorporated feedback from experts and modified our method for obtaining individual expert HSI models. Instead of using pre-determined probability distributions developed from literature and expert interviews for inclusion in individual HSI models, we allowed experts to draw hypothetical suitability relationships between each variable and masked bobwhite habitat suitability. We then developed mathematical probability distributions which replicated each experts drawing. Using this method we have completed draft HSI models for 5 of the 6 species experts who agreed to assist with this objective. Once draft models were complete, we sent them back to each corresponding expert for their verification. We have received feedback on the draft HSI models from 2 of these experts and have incorporated suggested changes. We will continue to develop the remaining expert-based HSI models and an additional HSI model based solely on the literature. We will also make any changes to existing expert-based HSI models as recommended by experts during the review process.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Avian Predators | Winter Food | Invasive Plant spp | Climate | Woodland /Grassland Edges | Thermal Refugia | Brush and Shrub Cover | Vegetation Height (herbaceous) | Leguminous Shrubs | Vegetation Structural Diversity | Arthropod Diversity and Abundance | Bare Ground | Grass Cover | Tree Cover | Mammalian Predators | Herbaceous Species Diversity | Forb Cover | Water |
| Expert 1 | -1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | -1 | -2 |  |  | 6 |
| Expert 2 |  | 1 | -2 | 3 |  |  |  |  | 1 |  | 4 |  |  |  |  | 4 |  | 5 |
| Expert 3 |  |  |  | 1 |  | 2 | 3 |  |  | 5 |  | 4 | 5 | 2 |  | 6 | 3 |  |
| Expert 4 | -8 | 3 | -7 | 6 | 2 |  | 3 | 9 | 3 |  |  | 4 | 1 |  | -8 |  | 5 |  |
| Expert 5 | -4 | 1 |  |  | 5 | 3 | 2 |  |  | 5 |  |  | 6 | 6 | -4 |  | 6 |  |
| Expert 6 |  | 6 |  |  | 4 |  | 3 |  |  | 1 | 6 |  | 4 | 5 |  | 2 | 6 |  |
| Expert 7 |  |  | -1 | 1 | 3 |  | 5 |  | 2 | 3 |  | 4 | 3 | 6 |  | 1 | 2 | 16 |
| Expert 8 |  |  | -16 | 1 |  |  | 6 |  | 3 |  |  |  | 5 |  |  | 2 | 4 | 16 |
| Expert 9 |  |  |  | 1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  | | | | | | | |  | | | | | | | | |  |

Table 1. Map of important variables showing degree of similarity in the rank of each variable by species experts. Not all experts ranked each variable. Where no rank was given to a variable, we inferred a rank from discussions within the interview. We left the rank column blank if the variable was not discussed in enough detail by an expert to infer a rank. All variable ranks will be confirmed in future interviews. Low numbers imply high importance whereas high numbers imply low importance.

Table 2. Variables listed in order from most important to least important according to expert opinion. These values are subject to change after confirmation of variable ranks from species experts.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Habitat Variable | Rank | Weight-1 |
| Climate | 1 | 2.166667 |
| Leguminous Shrubs | 2 | 2.25 |
| Thermal Refugia | 3 | 2.5 |
| Winter Food | 4 | 2.75 |
| Herbaceous Species Diversity | 5 | 3 |
| Woodland /Grassland Edges | 6 | 3.5 |
| Vegetation Structural Diversity | 7 | 3.5 |
| Brush and Shrub Cover | 8 | 3.666667 |
| Bare Ground | 9 | 4 |
| Grass Cover | 10 | 4 |
| Tree Cover | 11 | 4 |
| Avian Predators | 12 | 4.25 |
| Forb Cover | 13 | 4.333333 |
| Mammalian Predators | 14 | 4.5 |
| Arthropod Diversity and Abundance | 15 | 5 |
| Invasive Plant spp | 16 | 6.5 |
| Vegetation Height (herbaceous) | 17 | 9 |
| Water | 18 | 10.75 |

**Appendix A:**

For all beta densities listed below, the beta function (B(α,β)) is defined as:

Woody Cover (Brush and Shrub)

C:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Guthery 2001 woody cover-#1.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Guthery 2001 woody cover- fatter curve-#2.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Guthery 2001 woody cover- biased towards 0 with fat tail-#3.emf

C:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Guthery 2001 woody cover- linear trend-#4.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Goodwin interview woody cover-#5.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Goodwin interview woody -cover-fatter distribution-#6.emf

C:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Kopp 1998 Woody Cover-#7.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Lusk 2006 woody cover-#8.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Woody Veg\Lusk 2006 woody cover- fatter curve-#9.emf

Bare Ground

C:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Bare Ground\Guthery 2001 Bare ground#1.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Bare Ground\Kopp 1998 Bare Ground#2.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Bare Ground\Rader-Lusk-Cohan Bare Ground#3.emf

Nest Substrate Height

C:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Nest Substrate Height\Arredondo 2007- Nest Substrate Height#1.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Nest Substrate Height\Lusk 2006- Nest Substrate Height#2.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Nest Substrate Height\Rader 2001- Nest Substrate Height#3.emf

Herbaceous Cover

C:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Herbaceous Cover\Arredondo Herb cover High Var#1.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Herbaceous Cover\Arredondo Herb cover Low Var#2.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Herbaceous Cover\Arredondo Herb cover Med Var#3.emf

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C:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Herbaceous Cover\Rader-Kuvleski Herb Cover -High Var#7.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Herbaceous Cover\Rader-Kuvleski Herb Cover -Low Var#8.emfC:\Documents and Settings\cnadeau\My Documents\Work\Masked Bobwhite\Graphs\Herbaceous Cover\Rader-Kuvleski Herb Cover -Med Var#9.emf

Visual Obstruction (at ground level)

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