

THE WORLDWIDE OUTDOORS MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010

# TEXAS SPORTING<sup>®</sup> *Journal*

FEATURING  
**COVEY**  
RISING

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# COVEY

By Tom Stephenson

# RISING

*The Re-creation of a Quail Mecca*



There are legions of them still, weathered and creased hunters skittering west down the long highways of our state, maybe churning north a bit through the Panhandle, perhaps veering to an even smaller slab of the Oklahoma prairie. Steadfastly they tug high-dollar trailers housing higher-dollar braces of trained quail dogs.

What they would *really* like to do is travel back in time. Back then—the '50s

into the mid '70s—the bobwhite was the abundant gentleman bird grandly holding for granddad's fine set of pointers on anybody's 40 acres. Today these hunters convene in a torturous landscape of mesquite, stickers, rattlesnakes and prickly pear to hope in vain that this year the birds will make a magical comeback.

But like the last prairie American Indians praying for the return of the buffalo, these modern-day hunters tell

tales of defeat and helplessness in their gaits and countenances. Their quail hunting grounds are still shrinking; forecasts are not good; no scientific wonder awaits to save the day.

My jaw still tightens thinking about the "outfitter" who recently sold a client hundreds of pen-raised quail with the promise that they would "hide" soon before multiplying over the next year. More than 90 years of study prove that releasing tame birds, unable to recognize

Rick Snipes takes aim at some of the fruits of his labor.

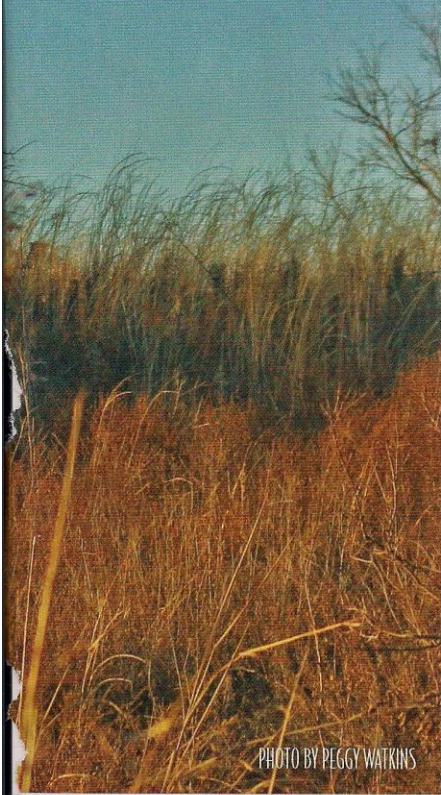


PHOTO BY PEGGY WATKINS

a food source and disinclined to covey for survival, will not result in even one more bird on this gentleman's ranch in a year's time. Stocking the bobwhite is a futile exercise that doesn't work on any scale.

Enter onto this bleak and beaten scene a long sliver of a man named Rick Snipes. Now Texan through and through, the lanky and animated Snipes still carries a twinge of Carolina in his constantly positive resonance.

The 60-year-old rancher sweated his way out of a near-certain sentence of languishing in the mills of South Carolina by excelling on the playing fields and basketball courts at Davidson College. He then forged a successful business career and is now a major actor in what may be the most encouraging and innovative story for modern-day quail enthusiasts.

From the lunch table, Snipes stretches a long wave of his angular hand, meant to include all his 6,000 acres surrounding us about 10 miles from Aspermont and talks a little about how he got here. He originally leased the land for hunting from 1980 to 1993 and then bought it with partners "when I really didn't have the money to buy it," Snipes laughs. "Please understand, this was a great quail hunting place before I bought it, but the property had been abused. There were more cow bones out here than grass. I knew that quail

needed nesting cover, escape cover and cover to rear their broods, and that all that cover can be different."

You are probably thinking that of Snipes here just went out and wallet-whipped these quail with feeders, water lines, varmint traps and all the toys that T. Boone Pickens and his ilk have tried with varying success. Nope. On this expanse, with elevations from 1,700 to 2,100 feet, not a feeder, not a pond or windmill tank or surface water or piped water of any kind exists. Not even a single rock dots this sandiest of soils. Why?

"The quail don't need it," Snipes says firmly, adding, "You know standing water also attracts animals accomplished at depredating the nests, and *that* I worry about. What I really *don't* worry about is the predator that kills quail one at a time. In fact, I'm not sure quail would fly were it not for the Cooper's hawk. Quail learned their explosive

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flight patterns from dodging the Cooper's hawk."

By the time the 1999-2000 quail season came along, Snipes' partners decided that they were not nearly as enthralled with this new quail management plan as the former basketball star, and there was a cordial parting of the ways. Snipes was in full-throttle mode and quickly started by burning lots of diesel and then burning his own terra firma.

He fired up the D5 Caterpillar and went after the cedar with a grubbing blade. A D7 or D8 was enlisted for roller chopping. Crop dusters were recruited and joined the fray. Next came the planting of ragweed, native grasses, forbs and seed plants.

The burning, Snipes explains, forms a "West Texas food plot" and is actually an old Indian trick. "The patch burn produces green that attracts the cows that eat it. They stay there and stomp

Snipes has created  
an ideal quail haven.

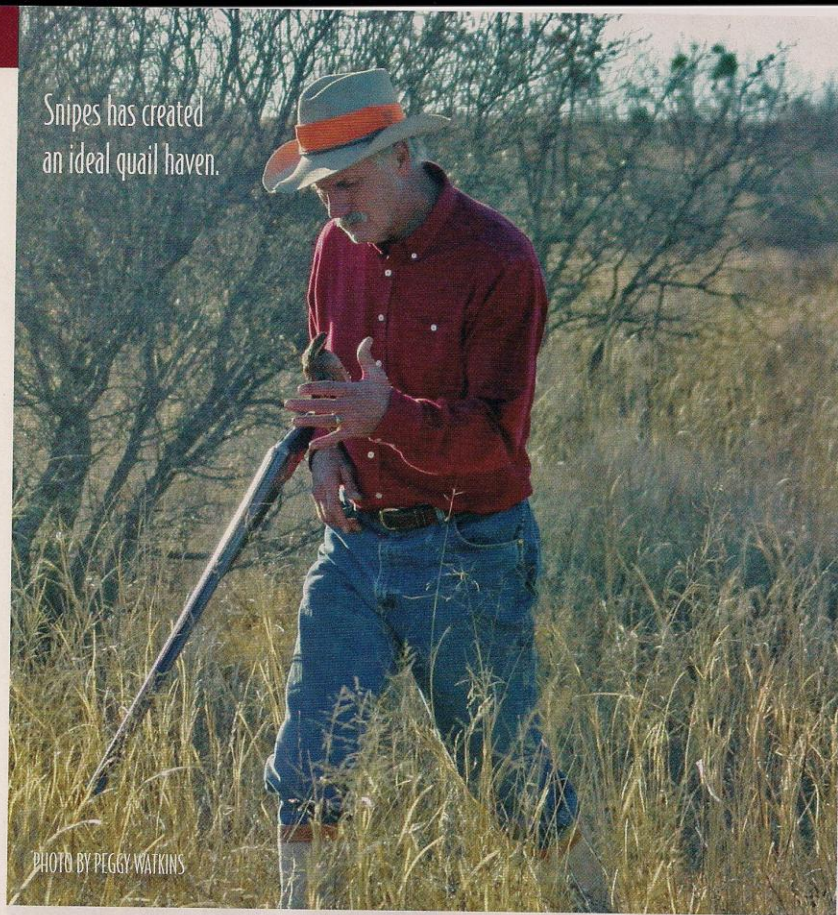


PHOTO BY PEGGY WATKINS

## THE DALLAS SAFARI CLUB & JOHN BANOVICH

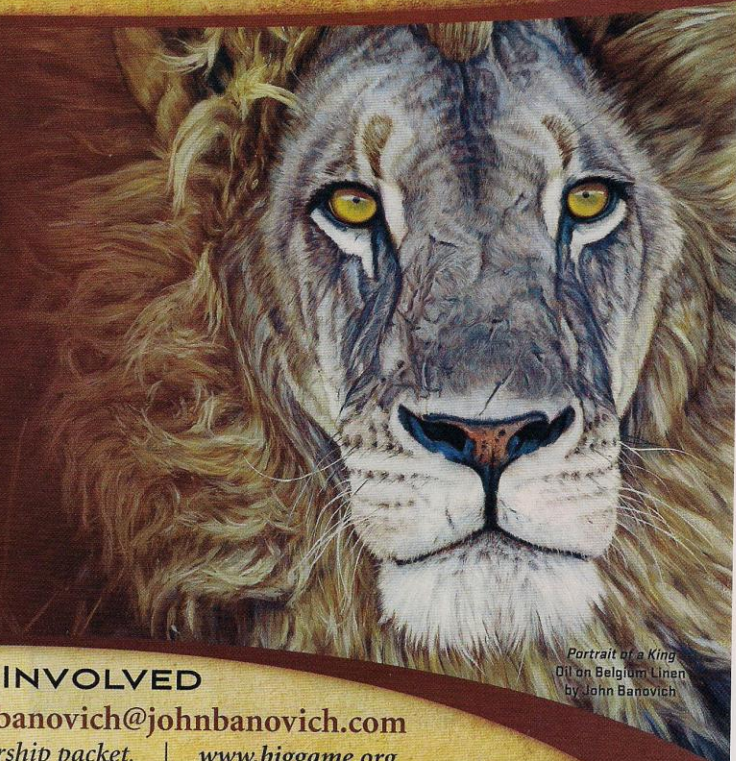
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Portrait of a King  
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The Snipes Ranch offers pointing dogs a target-rich environment.



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around, and now you have new growth and fertilizer. For me it is the final cleanup and precisely what the Indians did to attract buffalo.” It’s also why one tribe came to be known as the Blackfeet from running through charred soil.

To turn wild acreage like this into what Snipes calls “a place where every single acre is huntable and gives the birds a little food and a little cover” takes a lot of effort—and a good deal of money. But the fecund landscaping for little bluestem, clump grasses, sunflowers, shinnery, mottes of mesquite trees and plumb thickets—to protect from hawks and hunters—can prove more than a little rewarding.

Snipes talks casually about moving 12 or 14 coveys per half-day even in the bad years and vividly recalls the dogs once working 30 coveys between 2:45 and 5:30 p.m. Astounding, but not outrageous, when you consider that Snipes once managed an aerial spray of his property that went poorly. Too much overhead cover soon died, and the

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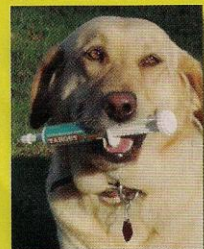
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Tall grass and a hunting companion are a quail hunter's dream.



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Snipes solution was to quickly transplant plumb thickets. "If a group of hunters walks up to a covey and everybody gets a good shot, then you don't have enough cover," Snipes says, matter-of-factly.

Many of this new generation of quail farmers like Folsom Bell, Dick McCallum and James Parkey rave about how government programs can really

help the pocketbook of serious quail managers and have in the past even offered handsome bonuses just for signing up. Snipes agrees to a point. "Sure," he says, "the government offers some really good programs, but they are just too slow for me."

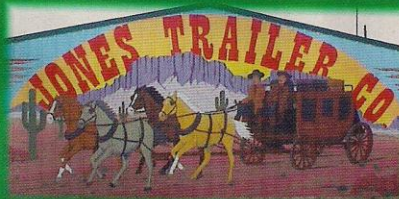
Snipes suggests we should take a tour of the ranch and bring our shotguns along. By the time we move to

the kennels to boot the dogs my heart is pounding faster than any pointer in the ranch's string. Even my antediluvian pal Mickey Tom looks a tad dry in the mouth as we set out in the Jeep. On this property a fellow can walk 4 miles out without ever making a turn, but this day we are just trying to cover as much ground as possible. In fact, I would not define that astonishing afternoon as a *hunt*.

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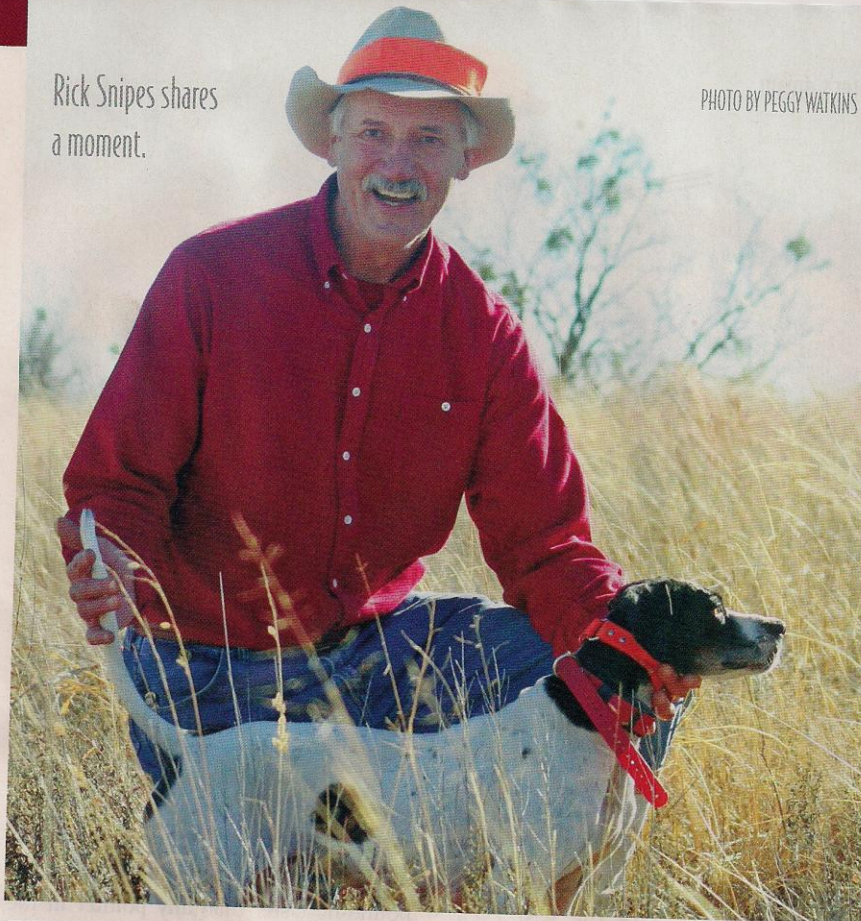


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Rick Snipes shares  
a moment.

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I feel more like a character in one of those Xbox 360 games sans Megan Fox. The dog collars double as GPS devices. With ranch manager Raul Lujan driving and my wife, Lana, navigating, Rick peers at his small control panel and witnesses a “tail” going straight to 12 o’clock. Then he dispatches us. “Okay, Bonnie on point 30 yards to the northwest. Oh, look at that: We also have a point from Sugar about 55 yards to the south and east a little.” On the first flush Mickey does not kill a bird. Mickey *never* misses a bird, but no one cares, and I do not even needle him—then.

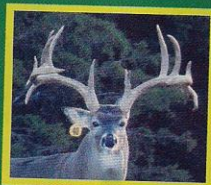
We stay out just long enough for me to make this bet with anyone: You name the wager, and I bet I can go *anywhere* on that ranch with *any* of those bird dogs and find a covey of quail in less than 20 minutes.

So, here is the basic message I left with: It can be done; landowners *can* take control and create the perfect haven for wild quail — they just need to know what the hell to do and be willing to spend the money.

Snipes and the ubiquitous Texas Extension Wildlife Specialist Dr. Dale Rollins are at the forefront of a small corps of Texas volunteer quail soldiers, and they are all doing pretty much the same thing now: grubbing, burning, adding brush, utilizing cows, spraying, and planting wonderful wild beans, croton, buffalo burr, Texas bull nettle, etc. They are light years—and dollars—ahead of the quail programs in Thomasville, Georgia, and plantations near Tallahassee, Florida.

It is about dark when we load up. The dog box does not feel heavy anymore. Mickey, Tom and I are teasing like kids. There is a lilt in our step and the six-hour drive is going to be fun. We have lots to talk about. Maybe this is the year the buffalo return to our hunting grounds. •

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