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Childress ag students take class afield

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The grass and brush were silky wet with dew, the light a cloudy, warm morning haze, as the small group of teenagers walked through the ranch gate and started single-file into the mesquites.

Then a two-note whistle floated back from the brush.

Russell Graves instantly threw his hand up into the air and brought the group to a halt.

"Hear that?"

Then it came again.

Hooo-WHEEET. Hooo-WHEEET.

Except it really sounded like "Bob-white, bob-white" - the call of a male bobwhite quail.

Graves looked at the faces of his students. Several were nodding, grinning slightly at the burly ag teacher.

"Told you this was a better spot. More cover, and those wild quail."

They looked like a class of high school seniors in any small town in Texas -

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four girls, nine boys. One in a cowboy hat, a couple wearing letter jackets or T-shirts bearing "Childress Football" or some rodeo challenge.

Like any other class, except for their classwork.

Emily Robertson carried a clipboard. Lance Cooper held a long antenna and a small electronic box. Jim Self, in the cowboy hat, was carrying a small cage holding a half-dozen quail.

"See that big elm tree over there?" Graves said, pointing toward a big tree a hundred yards into the brush. "Let's take 'em over there. That's a good spot."

The class followed their teacher's direction like, well, like a covey of young quail.

What sets this class apart is not just that they take trips out of the class - it's what they do there.

Today's class project is radio telemetry on bobwhite quail, to study the travel patterns and survivability of pen-raised quail in the wild.

That's right. This class of 17- and 18-year-olds, in a small high school in a town of less than 7,000, high on the Texas Rolling Plains, is about to release a bunch of quail fitted with radio transmitters. And they will track the travels, and likely demise, of these birds with a radio receiver.

No, this is not normal high school curriculum.

In fact, it's a level of work that few college wildlife science majors see until graduate school.

These are quail they raised from day-old chicks, that they've babied and fed throughout their lives. And that they are now going to release, knowing they will probably end up as a meal for some hawk or feral house cat.

They reach the elm. The quail look out of the cage, not quite sure what's up.

Jim Self and Kyle Christopher, the only sophomore in the class, remove one quail that has lost its collar, and they reattach it. The tiny unit, just a kernel-of-corn-sized bug with a tiny wire collar and antenna, fits over the bobwhite's head and secures around its neck.

Kyle is included in the class because he is an alumnus of the Bobwhite Brigade, an intense summer program by the Texas Ag Extension Service that introduces teen-agers to quail management. There are three week-long Brigades in the state each summer, and graduates are expected to go home and teach quail management in their communities.

Graves shows them how to switch on the receiver and check the signal coming from each transmitter. Emily notes the signal from each quail on the clipboard.

"OK, open the cage and let's move back over here."

Kyle carefully flips open the cage door. At first the quail don't seem to understand their new freedom. Then one hops up on the open door and hops out into the shin-high grass.

"Once one goes, they'll all go," Russell observes. And they do.

The six quail quickly zip through the brush and grass, flashing in and out of sight, headed for the thicker cover under the elm.

Hooo-WHEEET.

One of the wild bobwhites calls again.

"Probably some of them will join up with that wild covey," Graves suggests, then switches back into the teaching mode.

"Who thinks they'll make it through today?" A couple of the kids raise their hands, others laugh or shrug.

It's a key part of the study. Bobwhite quail numbers are declining throughout the United States. And many landowners and hunting clubs release pen-raised quail to supplement the wild stock. How well and long those pen-raised birds survive is a key and growing part of the future of this species.

"OK, we'll come back this evening and see how far they've traveled," Graves said.

Walking back through the dewy grass, Graves explains why they're studying quail.

"It's a species of local economic significance. This is some of the best quail country in the world. And quail hunting is a huge economy base here, probably bigger than deer hunting. Landowners will lease their land for quail hunting, but not for deer hunting."

Graves is an interesting study himself. In his late 20s, he has been an Ag teacher for six years in Childress, his first teaching post out of college, after deciding that coaching wasn't what he really wanted to do. At a stocky 5-foot-8, Graves looks like the star catcher and hitter he was at Class 1A Dodge City north of Dallas - good enough to get a tryout with the Texas Rangers, and smart enough to realize after one 92-mph fastball that his playing days were probably over.

His love of the outdoors - and kids - led him to teach agriculture. Texas ag teachers have enough leeway in their curriculum that many include basic wildlife management in some of their classes. Graves takes that commitment to a whole new level.

"It'd be easy to just teach this out of a book. But I want to do more than that."

Graves in his spare time is one of the rising new stars in Texas outdoor photography. His specialty is photographing the outdoor recreation and wildlife of the open, brushy Rolling Plains of north-central Texas and the Texas Panhandle.

His photos and stories regularly appear in magazines such as "Texas Parks and Wildlife." The University of Texas Press will publish his first book, a photographic study of prairie dogs, later this year.

His class, called Ag Resources, may be the most intense wildlife management class taught in a high school in Texas. Before the quail study began, his students studied prairie dogs.

But instead of reading about them in a book, they headed out of town to a nearby ranch, where a prairie dog town covers 12.91 acres. How do we know it's that big? Because the students measured it, foot by foot, marking positions with GPS units, measuring the distance between holes, the arrangement of holes, the way the animals interact.

Oh, and they also check the pH of the soil, to see what changes the prairie dogs might have caused, and conducted video surveillance to watch the animals, which disappear whenever a human approaches.

They'd hoped to run a fiber optic camera down some of the holes, to determine shape and size, but the donated equipment didn't come in time.

How can a small-town high school class afford this kind of technology? Through pure creativity and salesmanship by the teacher.

For example, Graves contacted the Dallas Safari Club, asking if it could sponsor the quail telemetry project. Just the tiny transmitter collars cost \$126 each.

"They said they couldn't make an outright grant, but asked was there any hunting up here and could I donate a hunt for one of their events?" Russell chuckled. "So I took three of their guys duck hunting for a couple of days, and they donated the money for the equipment."

The three Dallas men - Keith Hill, Mike Smith and Mike Billings - didn't get a great duck hunt, Russell admits, but did make a big difference in the success of his class. Russell adds that he couldn't do the wealth and breadth of classwork that the program includes without support from his

school's principal and superintendent.

Back in the classroom, which includes a swimming pool filled with fish (tilapia, an Israeli forage fish), deer antlers and charts on preferred forage foods for quail, some of the kids explain what they get out of the class.

"I hadn't been outdoors that much before," one of the girls observed. "Now I want to be."

"We never get bored," another added.

"It's opened my eyes, especially on how everything's related," offered a third. "Before, if I saw a quail, I never thought anything about it. Now, when I see a quail, I understand how it got there, what it eats and what eats it, how it all fits together."

Some of the kids will go into wildlife-related careers. Jim Self, for instance, wants to be a wildlife biologist, maybe in part because his father is the county's game warden. But most will go on to other interests. Regardless of their future careers, all will leave with an understanding and appreciation for wildlife, ecology and management - how it all fits together.

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- **Fly-fishing guide John Gulley II will be the "professor" for the Golden Spread Fly-fishers 1999 Fly-fishing Seminar next Saturday.**

Gulley has been a fly-fishing guide for 25 years, the past eight endorsed by Orvis Co. He gives fly-fishing seminars all over the country. He's one of the pioneers in fly-fishing for striped bass in fresh water and for fly-fishing Arkansas tail waters for trout.

This is more than a lecture. The class will include tips on fly-fishing for trout, bass and stripers, instruction on fly tying and hands-on fly-casting lessons.

The full-day class begins in Auditorium Classroom A at the West Campus of Amarillo College, 6222 West 9th St., at 9 a.m.

Cost is \$15 for members, \$25 for non-members, \$15 for anglers younger than 16 and \$30 for membership and seminar. Lunch will be provided for \$5.

For more information call Champ Turner at 355-0156.

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