

At Fort Riley, rugged training grounds benefit hunters as well as Soldiers

By BRENT FRAZEE
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JUNCTION CITY, Kan. | When Dave McNeal hunts quail in Kansas, he often feels like he is in the middle of a war zone.

Tanks ramble across the rugged landscape in the distance. The boom of artillery fire shakes the ground. And the crisp sound of gunfire cuts through the cold fall air.



McNeal

Welcome to Fort Riley, the army base that is the home of the Big Red One — and some of the best quail hunting in the nation.

That's McNeal's world in November and December, when the ground is covered with frost or snow and the bird hunting is at its best.

For McNeal, a retired first sergeant who was stationed at Fort Riley in the early 1970s and again in the 1980s, that's the time to begin following his bird dog through the thick cover where he once conducted maneuvers.

"Hunting here is definitely a unique experience," said McNeal, 63, who lives in St. George, Kan. "Where else will you be hunting and hear the artillery blasts and run across fake villages?"

"Because a lot of this land is left wild and woolly for maneuvers, there's a lot of great cover for wildlife. It can be challenging to hunt, but I don't think there are too many places where you'll find the quail that we do." McNeal often relates how long he has been hunting Fort Riley to the change in times.

"When I first started hunting here, there were fake Vietnamese villages set up for training exercises," he said. "Now there are Middle East villages.

"But the quail hunting hasn't changed that much over the years. It was good then, and it's good now." McNeal got a reminder last Sunday when he took Dave Zumbaugh of Shawnee and Zumbaugh's daughter, Rachel, on a hunt.

Not long after McNeal let his German wirehair pointer, Mattie, out of her kennel, the dog locked on a solid point. When the hunters moved in, two coveys of quail exploded into flight. Shots rang out, birds fell and another good hunt was under way.

"Over the years, I've probably covered every inch of this base, either on maneuvers or hunting," McNeal said. "When we would bivouac (set up a temporary encampment on training missions) and we would flush quail, I would make a note of it.

"I kept a map of all the places I found birds and I would go back there." Walking through thick grass and heavy brush — and down paths where tanks had rolled through the cover — McNeal and the Zumbaughs found plenty of quail on this day. By the time they were done, they had flushed four coveys and had taken seven birds.

"We had our chances," McNeal said with a chuckle. "But these birds can be hard to hit, especially in this heavy cover." One thing is certain: Fort Riley has no shortage of good cover. About 71,000 of the base's 101,000 acres are open to hunting.

Military training takes precedence, of course. The areas that are open to hunting change with the Army's schedule. Hunters also have to purchase a special Fort Riley hunting permit, in addition to having a Kansas small-game license. And firearms have to be registered before they can be brought onto the base.

For hunters, that opens the door to a unique experience. They see troops out running with their platoons as they drive through the developed part of the base. But in just a short distance, they are in a different world.

Remote fields filled with prairie grasses, brush and timber stretch for as far as the eye can see. There also are crop fields, ponds and food plots scattered throughout the grounds.

Wildlife biologists on base manage part of the land for wildlife, and it shows. Fort Riley has an abundant population of quail, deer, turkeys, prairie chickens, waterfowl and even elk. It also has pheasants, though not nearly as many as it once did.

"I remember in the 1970s when you couldn't go 500 yards without flushing a pheasant," McNeal said. "It isn't like that anymore. "We still have pheasants, but you have to work for them."

You also have to work to find the quail. With Fort Riley's sea of habitat and rugged terrain, a hunting trip can often feel like a military training exercise.

Hunters often have to cover a lot of ground before locating birds. But McNeal feels like he has an edge. After hunting Fort Riley since the 1970s, he knows where the coveys traditionally are found — and where the birds will go once those coveys are scattered.

Ron Henely, a captain in the Army stationed at Fort Riley, also is avid about hunting on the base. He often follows his three bird dogs through the thick brush in pursuit of quail. He also hunts turkeys at Fort Riley and knows where to find them.

"I usually shoot my turkeys during my lunch hour," he said. "We have one old wood-cutting road we call Turkey Alley. I can't tell you how many turkeys we've taken there over the years."

But it's the quail that often attract the biggest following. With all of the national attention focusing on the quail's decline, Fort Riley stands out as a place that is bucking that trend.

"Last year the hunting was great. It wasn't unusual to go out and find seven coveys," McNeal said. "This year we're finding four coveys on our better days, but that's still good."

"This is about the only place I'd want to hunt. The way I look at it, I'm spoiled."