Wanted: Landowners on the Upper Shore to Help Reverse Northern Bobwhite Declines by Dan Small

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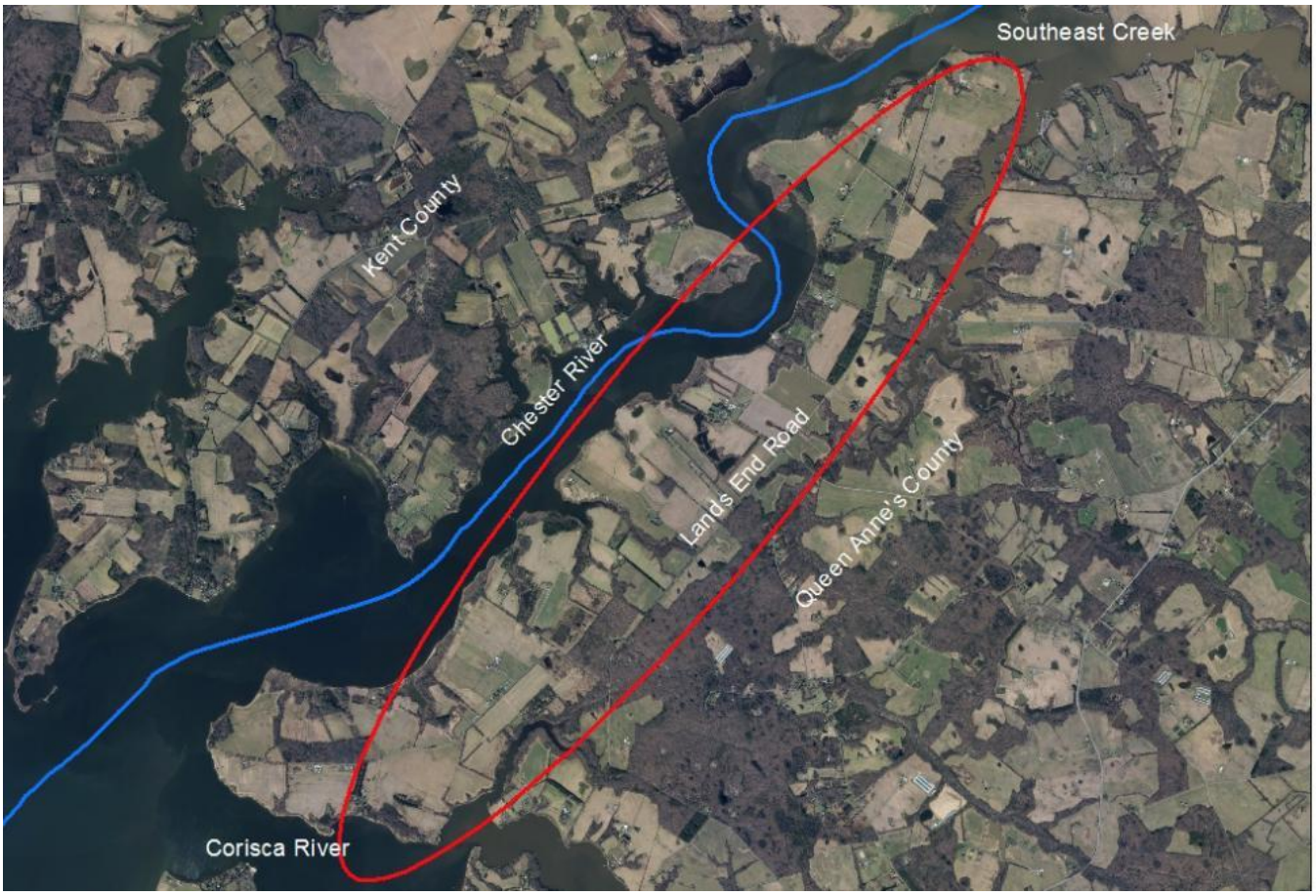
The Natural Lands Project is looking for landowners interested in setting aside marginal cropland to help declining Northern Bobwhites. Since 2015 we have been working throughout Kent and Queen Anne's Counties, in addition to these current efforts we would also like to target two areas that currently have small quail populations. These two areas, one each in Kent and Queen Anne's, have some existing habitat, but we could have a major positive impact on the quail population by installing additional acres of nesting and brood rearing habitat. In Queen Anne's we are looking to work with landowners along Lands End Road from Southeast Creek south to the Corsica River and in Kent, farms between Betterton and Still Pond (see accompanying maps).

Male Indigo Bunting in a wildflower meadow planted in 2016 by NLP.

People growing up on the Eastern Shore in the 60's and '70s remember well the loud expressive whistle 'BOB-white' emanating from around the farm in late spring and lasting throughout the hot summer months. In the cooler months, bird dogs searched for the scent of nearby quail coveys through wooded edges, scrubby briar tangles, hedgerows and bean fields across property boundaries followed closely by their owners. This characteristic bird, the Northern Bobwhite, of Maryland's agricultural landscape has disappeared from all but a few isolated areas throughout the Shore. Along with the decline in quail populations, we hear fewer grassland birds and see fewer pollinating insects and wildflowers.

There are myriad theories for the drastic decline in grassland biodiversity in such a short period of time and most, if not all, have a grain of truth to them. However, without a doubt the single largest driver of bobwhite decline on the Eastern Shore is habitat loss. Several factors have contributed to habitat loss; there are simply more people living on the shore and as a result we have more developed areas. Additionally, our farms have changed. The acceleration of farming technologies after World War II brought with it larger equipment and increased use of herbicides and pesticides, tools that allowed farmers to till more ground more of the time. This, in turn, led to larger and larger farms and fewer and fewer small fields. Suddenly the 'back forty' that was periodically fallow and permanently surrounded by a hedgerow was no longer. Today much of landscape on the Shore is defined by crops, forests, waterways and buffers of exotic cool season grasses—similar to lawns—with little in between.



Map showing target area in Queen Anne's County, an area where additional habitat would substantially help Northern Bobwhite populations.

But all is not lost. In 2015 Washington College's Center for Environment & Society (CES) partnered with the Chester River Association (CRA) and Tall Timber Research Station, the nation's leader in bobwhite research and management of fire-dependent ecosystems, to launch the Natural Lands Project (NLP) with a $700,000 award from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. Using the remarkable habitat restoration success at CES's research station on Chino Farms in Queen Anne's County and CRA's success at promoting best management

practices on local area farms, NLP set out with the goal of creating a balance between cropland and wildlife habitat to improve water quality. NLP promotes and installs native warm season grasses as best management practices that will help reverse bobwhite population declines and reduce excess sedimentation and nutrient runoff in our waterways.

Map showing target area in Kent County, an area of small farms and hedgerows – the addition of nesting habitat would help Northern Bobwhites.

In addition to buffers and fields for bobwhite NLP also installs wetlands in poorly drained areas of marginal farm fields. Wetlands are phenomenal at reducing nutrients and preventing sediment from entering the Bay's tributaries, with the added benefit of proving critical habitat for over-wintering waterfowl. Following up on the successful launch of NLP in 2015, CES was just recently awarded another round of funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to continue adding habitat for grassland biodiversity and to help improve the Bay' water quality – see http://chestertownspy.org/2017/09/24/500k-grant-to-center-for-environment-and-society/

It is important to note that productive farming, vibrant wildlife, and healthy water are not mutually exclusive. By taking marginal cropland out of production and planting a mix of native warm season grasses and wildflowers we are creating areas for bobwhite, other grassland birds, and pollinators to find much needed food, shelter, and breeding sites.

Male Northern Bobwhite on Chino Farms.

On Chino Farms there is a thriving native bobwhite population, in fact, now the largest in Maryland. This is a result of well-managed grasslands and early successional habitat that weave throughout a for-profit conventional agricultural operation. Since 1999 when marginal areas of row crops were converted to native habitat, these grasslands have reduced an estimated 80 lbs phosphorus, 1200 lbs nitrogen and 40,500 lbs of sediment from entering our local waterways annually. Our experience and results on Chino make us confident that habitat is the key missing ingredient for quail to once again to thrive on the Shore. As an Eastern Shore community we now need to work on landscape-level change, installing and managing grasslands and wetlands alongside of our farming priorities.

If you would like to find out more about the project, arrange a farm visit or see/hear quail on Chino Farms contact Dan Small, dsmall2@washcoll.edu or 410-708-4479 or visit www.washcoll.edu/nlp. We are looking forward to working with many more of the Eastern Shore's best land stewards as NLP grows.