

# WILDLIFE OF VICTORIA PARK

by John Serrao

## BOBWHITE QUAIL

After a possible absence of 3 or 4 years, the Bobwhite seems to have returned to Victoria Gardens' conservation preserves. We missed finding this small eastern quail during each of the last several annual Bird Counts that we conduct throughout Victoria Park each March, but lately there has been at least one family group noisily scurrying around through the brushy palmettos and scrub oaks in the conservation areas. On one recent walk I took along the trails there, 2 adult quail raced back and forth across my path while a group of chicks took cover several feet off the trail — a classic example of the parents trying to distract my attention from their young. I've also seen Bobwhite near the 13th hole of the Victoria Hills golf course where the vegetation around

the 2 ponds creates excellent habitat for these secretive birds.

The Northern Bobwhite is closely related to turkeys, grouse, pheasants, and chickens but much smaller — only about 9 or 10 inches long with a wingspread just over a foot. The male's most distinctive markings are its white throat and prominent white “eyebrow”, both of which are buffy in the female. Its name comes from its call : a clear, whistled “bobWHITE” with emphasis on the 2nd syllable. A female Bobwhite can lay 10 to 15 white eggs in a grass-lined hollow on the ground in a grassy,weedy place. The chicks, like all members of the chicken family, are precocial and almost immediately leave the nest to follow both parents in their search for insects and seeds. In winter several families may unite to form a large covey.

Throughout its range the Bobwhite has been suffering drastic population declines, mainly as

a result of habitat loss. Their meadows, fields, and pastures are disappearing as residential and agricultural development gobble them up, and as forests take over any remaining open habitat. Controlled fires and brush-cutting (as we do in Victoria Gardens with an ecological consulting company) can help restore the open habitat of Bobwhite and keep this charismatic bird around for us to enjoy.