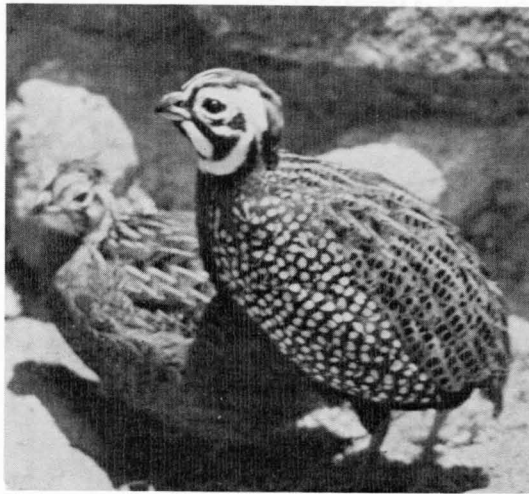


# Fooling With Fool Quail

OR

Messing With Mearn's

by H. Richard Mattice  
with Sheldon Dingle



Pair of Mearn's Quail.

The harlequin quail (*Cyrtonyx montezumae*) is probably the most beautiful of all the North American quails. It is also called Mearn's quail, Montezuma quail, fool quail, and painted quail.

In his authoritative work *Grouse and Quails of North America* (University of Nebraska Press, 1973) Paul Johnsgard describes the harlequin quail as "Adults, 8-9.5 inches long. The sexes are very different in appearance. Males have a beautiful facial pattern of black or bluish black and white and a soft, tan crest that projects backward and downward over the nape. The upper parts of

males are grayish to olive brown, extensively spotted and marked with black, white and buffy markings. The sides and flanks are dark grayish, with numerous rounded spots of white, cinnamon, or rufous brown, depending upon the population. The breast is unmarked brown, grading gradually to black on the abdomen and undertail coverts. Females are generally cinnamon-colored, with blackish markings extensive on the back. The female has a small, buffy crest that is less conspicuous than the males and a mottled brown and buffy face with a whitish chin and throat. The upper sur-

faces of the back and wings are extensively mottled, and the underparts are mostly buffy with black flecks or streaks in the abdominal region."

This delightful little bird is found scattered from southern New Mexico to the southern tip of Mexico. In southern Mexico there is a harlequin quail with a rather different coloration and which is called ocellated quail. There is some dispute as to whether or not the ocellated quail should be classified as a separate species.

Throughout the range of the harlequin quail, the pine-oak zone seems to be the most auspicious, supporting the most dense breeding populations. The pine-oak zone is characterized by rather tall, scattered trees and a grassy ground cover with some shrubbery.

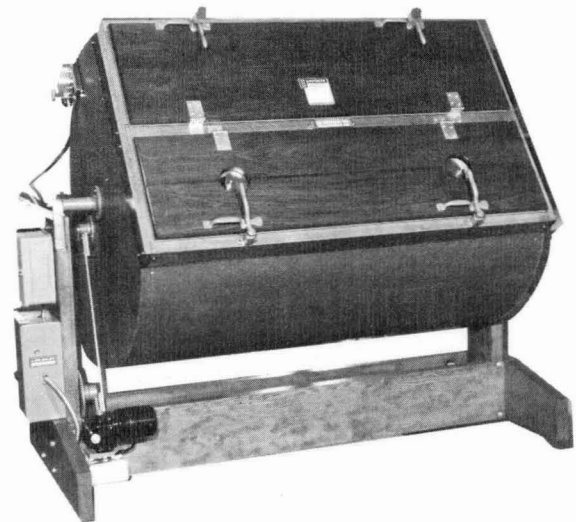
It is the bulb-bearing forbs and sedges that are important to the quail. Where the sheep or cattle have grazed off all these grassy plants, the quail diminish. The birds have quite stout legs and long claws that are well adapted to digging up the bulbs and fleshy tubers of the forbs and sedges. Various seeds, acorns, fruits, and insects are also eaten.

The summer rains, a high insect density, and the quail's breeding season all coincide and the young seem to feed almost exclusively upon high-protein insect matter. No doubt the birds derive much

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moisture from succulent food but they have also been observed drinking from small rain pools. It is not known whether water in the free state is necessary for the quails to breed.

Harlequin quail are strictly ground dwellers that forage about in small family-related coveys. They are sedentary birds preferring to remain in a rather small, familiar area. When danger approaches they do not like to run. Rather they will squat motionless until they are nearly stepped upon. The cowboys and hunters in the quail's range often kill the quail with a stick and pop them into the evening stew-pot. Hence the name "fool quail". The quail freeze until the last moment then explode into the air and fly just a short distance. They blend very well indeed into the ground cover of their habitat and even in a well planted aviary they seem to disappear when they sit motionless.

In captivity the harlequin becomes quite tame and will take meal worms from its keepers hand. They are curious little birds and can be called up by imitating their soft descending series of whistles. Harlequin quail are difficult to breed in captivity. In fact they are difficult to keep alive. They are susceptible to numerous diseases and to worm parasites but by careful management these problems can be overcome.

Both authors have kept harlequin quail in their aviaries but only H. Richard Mattice has been successful in getting them to breed. He tries to approximate the bird's natural environment and feeding habits. He provides well planted aviaries that afford the quail adequate shelter and he prepares special niches that the birds find attractive as nesting sites. The quail build a rather complex nest that is in effect a small, domed chamber woven of grass, straw, and hay. The harlequin tend to nest late in the season. Their peak egg-laying months being June and July. The eggs are gathered and incubated artificially. Some years, for unknown reasons, the quail make no attempt whatever to nest.

In any event, the harlequin quail is a very beautiful, tame, and delightful aviary bird that poses a challenge to the serious aviculturist. Keeping the bird is a joy; breeding it successfully is a wonderful experience.

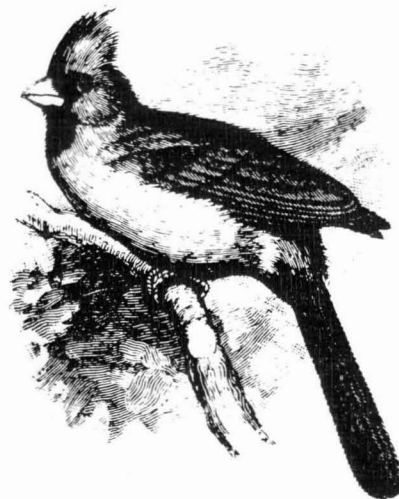
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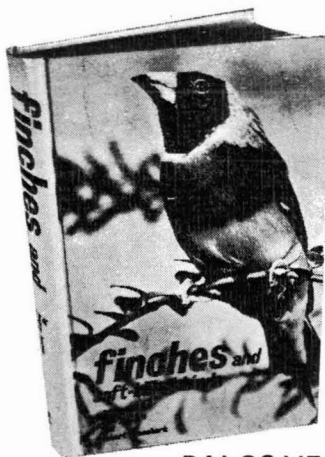
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