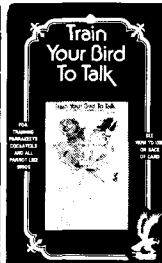


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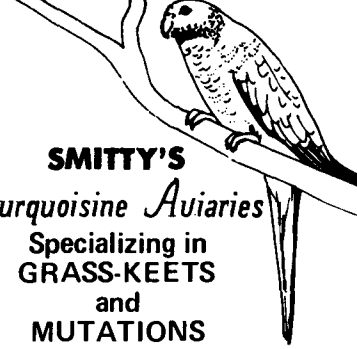
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SCALED QUAIL

by Sheldon Dingle



A true denizen of the desert is the Scaled Quail (*Callipepla squamata*), the only native gallinaceous bird in the great arid interior of Mexico. It is a good looking bird, rather quiet and dignified in its colors. Leopold, in *Wildlife of Mexico*, describes it:

Pale gray with a tufted whitish crest. Head and neck brownish gray, paler on throat. Foreback, sides, and chest steel gray, each feather bordered with black, giving a scaled effect. Underparts buffy gray, the breast feathers scaled, all ventral body feathers with a brown streak along the shaft.

As in many species of quail, the colors differ somewhat in birds from different areas.

The Scaled Quail does best in the lushest part of the desert where it finds ground that is mostly bare, annual weeds for seed which the bird eats, some surface water, and some bushy or cactus cover.

Most of the year the Scaled Quail are found in coveys of ten to twenty birds. Occasionally they gather in groups of one hundred or more. These coveys range over very large areas with, of course, each covey sticking to its own territory. The home ranges often overlap at the watering sources which tends to cause an observer to greatly overestimate the number of quail in a given area.

In early summer the coveys break up into pairs and nesting occurs during June, July, and August. This nesting season coincides with the summer rains that prevail in Mexico. The rains cause the desert to sprout profusely, providing greens and seeds which the young quail get started on. The insect population also explodes during this time of warmth and moisture and provides a high protein supplement for the young birds.

The summer rains are so important that during a very dry year the quail do not reproduce at all. Several quail breeders here in Southern California have noticed this phenomenon in their captive quail also. There are several reasons for

this. Lack of moisture probably weakens the adult birds because of poor diet. They don't come into breeding condition. Second, if the quail do lay a few eggs, the extremely dry weather does not provide enough humidity to hatch them, and third, the drought reduces the amount of seeds, greens, and insects that the young quail need to survive.

If the quail have one dry season it sharply reduces their numbers since quail populations have a forty to eighty percent "turnover" each year. Hence all of the birds found the winter after a drought will be adults and many of them will die before next breeding season.

The chief food of Scaled Quail is seed. Studies have shown that the birds eat a wide variety of weed seed including Bidens, corn cockle, dove weeds, foxtails, Panicum, Johnson grass, etc. They also eat fruits and berries in season. Of course the quail take full advantage of cultivated grain crops although there is not much farming in the Scaled Quail range. Insects of all sorts form an important secondary source of food, and a third source is the other greens. If one were attempting to breed these birds in captivity, a knowledge of their natural foods should prove helpful.

Fortunately these birds are not presently in danger of extinction. No matter how much they are hunted in Mexico they seem to maintain a constant population. The quail do not suffer much from predators either, except for owls and hawks. Coyotes and bobcats chase the quail a bit but are not very successful. The Roadrunner-Coyote cartoon format no doubt.

I know personally two outstanding breeders of quail but, alas, these fellows, R.O. Taylor and H.R. Mattice, like quail better than they like people. It is most difficult to obtain their avicultural records regarding quail but at least they are producing these beautiful birds for the enjoyment of many aviculturists. The Scaled Quail is an excellent addition to any bird collection.