

Wildlife Express

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Quail

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What is a quail?



Quail are a group of birds related to grouse and turkeys. They are small, plump birds that spend most of their time on the ground. Close to 130 different species of quail can be found worldwide. These birds live everywhere except in the coldest places. Six species of quail can be found living in North America. Idaho has only one native quail, the mountain quail. Several other species have been introduced to provide hunting opportunities.

Because these birds live on the ground, they are often hard to see. They are cryptically colored. This means that their coloring helps them blend in with their surroundings. Patterns on their feathers also help keep quail hidden. Many species are quite beautiful with interesting

color patterns that help them hide. Some quail, like the California quail have little topknots of feathers on their heads. This gives them a jolly look as they move around.

Living on the ground means that quail have strong legs. They can run up to 12 miles per hour! That is fast for a small bird. Their strong legs are also helpful in finding food by scratching on the ground. Quail mainly eat

plants. Leaves, bulbs, berries, seeds, buds and flowers are all eaten by quail. Tiny notches near the tip of a quail's lower beak are an adaptation for cutting off these plant parts. Quail, especially young birds, also eat insects in the summer.



Being ground dwelling birds, it might seem like flying is not very important for quail. However, if you have ever been startled by quail suddenly taking flight, you know flying is important for these small birds. Quail use flight as a quick get-away from danger. That explosive flight can scare and confuse a predator. A flock of birds can rise noisily from the ground, flying in all directions. This makes it hard for a predator to focus on a single bird. A quail's powerful flight gets them just far enough, fast enough to escape danger.

Quail also avoid danger by hanging out together. They are social birds and seem to enjoy being with other quail, especially in winter. Groups of quail are called coveys. In summer a covey might be made up of one or two families. As winter approaches, small coveys join others, forming flocks. These flocks can be quite large, depending on the species of quail. Having more eyes to search for food

and watch for predators helps keep all the birds safer. As spring arrives, the coveys break up. Males and females form pairs for the nesting season. Quail nest on the ground. The nest is not much more than a hollow bowl scraped in the dirt and lined with grasses and leaves. When the eggs hatch, the baby quail are tiny but can walk within a few hours of hatching. They can fly within 14 days. The family group travels together with the parents keeping an eye out for danger.

It is often easier to hear quail than see them. Each species has unique calls that help the covey stay together or find one another if they get separated. These calls can be quite loud and travel long distances. This helps a covey regroup after they have flown away from danger. Next time you are outside, listen for the calls of quail.

Photo: CC-BY Mark Heatherington at Flickr.com



Groups of quail are called coveys.

In summer a covey might be made up of one or two families.



Upland Game Birds

Quail are part of a large group of birds known as galliforms (GAL-a-forms). This group of over 250 different species includes turkeys, pheasants, grouse, ptarmigan, quail and partridge. They live everywhere except Antarctica. Here in Idaho, we have 13 species of these birds.

Galliforms spend most of their time on the ground. This makes them shy and secretive. In addition, most of these species are not brightly colored. Their feathers are shades of brown, tan and gray with spots and streaks of black and white. These colors help camouflage the birds. While they can fly, they prefer to use their legs to get around. But when they are startled, they take to the air. Their flight muscles and wings are made for short bursts of speed that take them away from danger. They also fly up into trees at night to roost where they will be safe from predators.

Some of these birds are very social, especially in the fall and winter. You can often see large flocks of quail in winter as they search for food.



Turkey



Ring-necked Pheasant



Sage-grouse

Being part of a flock helps them find food and stay safe from danger. Springtime is courtship season. The males of many species really strut their stuff to show off for the females.

Like quail, other galliforms also nest on the ground. When the eggs hatch, they do so at about the same time. This makes it possible for all the baby birds to leave the nest together within a day of hatching. These new chicks can walk, run and feed themselves as soon as they leave their nest. Being able to leave the nest so quickly is important. Many predators are attracted to eggs, especially when they are hatching. By fall, the youngsters have reached their adult size.

Mountain Quail

The mountain quail is Idaho's only native quail. It is the largest native quail in the United States. About the size of a ruler, this species weighs as much as a large apple. Mountain quail are beautiful birds with light brown backs, grey chests and chestnut feathers with white bars on their sides. Their throats are also chestnut-colored. They are the only quail that has a long slender feather plume on the head. The angle of this plume can tell you how the quail is feeling. If it is angled back, the bird is relaxed, but if the plume is straight up, the bird is alert for danger. Both males and females have these plumes.

Mountain quail eat mostly plants. They form small coveys, especially in the winter. In spring the males put on a display to impress the females. He will bow and fan his tail and flank feathers to look large and impressive. The male might also hold out his wings. Females make a ground nest lined with grasses and pine needles. They incubate nine to 15 buff-colored eggs. Baby mountain quail leave the nest only a few hours after hatching.

Mountain quail live in the western part of Idaho. They prefer dense brushy areas in the mountains. In summer, they can be found up to 10,000 feet in elevation. While this species was once common, today it is only found in scattered populations. Habitat loss has hurt this species. It is now considered rare in Idaho. If you see a mountain quail, please report your sighting to the nearest Fish and Game office. Sightings help biologists learn more about these beautiful birds. This helps them protect and restore habitat so mountain quail populations can grow.



California Quail

Chi-ca-go!



Photo: CC-BY Ken Drozd at Flickr.com

The quail you are most likely to see in Idaho is the California quail. They are common in lower elevation dry habitats in the western part of the state, north to the Palouse prairie. Sagebrush, rabbitbrush, agricultural fields and even neighborhoods are good places to see California quail. This species of quail was introduced to Idaho around 1900 to provide hunting opportunities. They are challenging birds to hunt and provide delicious meals.

California quail are smaller than mountain quail. They are slightly shorter and weigh about as much as a medium-sized apple. Males are brown and gray with a black face outlined in white. Females are brownish gray with no markings on their face. Both sexes have a scaled pattern on their bellies of

white, cream and chestnut. Males and females also have a topknot on their head. It is shorter in females and longer in the males. While the topknot looks like one feather, it is a cluster of six overlapping feathers.

California quail are plant eaters. They especially like seeds. This makes them easy to attract to platform bird feeders in yards. Insects and other invertebrates like millipedes and snails are also on the menu. These quail digest their food with the help of protozoans (pro-tow-ZOW-ans) that live in their digestive system. These are single-celled, microscopic animals.

Quail chicks do not have these protozoans when they hatch. They eat their parent's poop to get them! While that sounds rather disgusting, it's the best way for the baby quail to get what they





need. These quail also get most of the water they need from the plants they eat. This is an adaptation for living in dry climates.

California quail nest on the ground. They line their nest with stems and grasses. The 12-16 eggs are white to creamy in color. Like other quail, the chicks can follow their parents a few hours after hatching. Parent quail often join other family groups to form larger coveys. In winter, these quail can form very large flocks of up to 75 birds. They forage for food in the morning and late afternoon. When night falls, the quail fly into dense trees to roost for the night. The trees provide safety from nighttime predators and protection from wind, cold, rain and snow.

If you live in areas with California quail, you have probably heard them calling. Their most common call is a loud Chi-ca-go. It is most often given when a quail gets separated from its group or mate. Quail also call when they are getting ready to move to a new location. The calls help keep the covey together. You might

also hear a softer pit-pit call. This is an alarm call. It warns other quail of danger. A pair of quail have an interesting way of calling to each other. It is called antiphonal (an-TI-fone-al) calling. This occurs when the male and female quickly alternate their calls. This makes a tight pattern of sound. It sounds like only one bird is calling, not two.



Idaho's Other Quail

As you have read in this issue of Wildlife Express, California quail were introduced to Idaho. Two other species of quail have also been introduced to our state. Like the California quail, these others were also brought to Idaho for hunting opportunities.

Northern bobwhite were brought to the Treasure Valley in the 1870s. These small brown and white quail are native to the southeastern United States. Named for their loud "bob-white" calls, they are an important game bird. Early settlers missed hunting bobwhite. They wanted to have that opportunity in their new home.

Northern Bobwhite

Unfortunately, bobwhite were not able to adapt well to Idaho's cold, snowy winters. They never became established in the state.

Another quail that was brought to Idaho is the Gambel's quail. This species looks a bit like the California quail, including having a topknot. However, they are native to the southwest where they live in brushy habitat in desert ecosystems. In 1917, this bird was introduced into Lemhi County. Over the years, a small population of Gambel's quail has survived in the county. It never became common, probably due to the cold winters. Today, small coveys of these birds can sometimes still be found in dense brushy habitats.

Gambel's Quail

Both the bobwhite and Gambel's quail are examples of species that were introduced into a place for which they are not well adapted. While hunters enjoyed short-term hunting, the birds were unable to survive for long. They never were able to establish large populations because they were not able to adapt well to living in Idaho.



Fitting In



Sometimes an animal or plant lives somewhere outside its original range. It might have arrived accidentally. It might have been introduced to a new place by people. California quail were introduced to Idaho. Even though they have lived here for over a century, they are not a native species. Instead, they are considered naturalized. This means that they have become part of a new ecosystem without causing problems in that ecosystem. Even as their population has spread, California quail have fit into Idaho habitats. They have not caused problems for the native animals sharing those habitats.

It is important to be very careful when introducing a new animal or plant to an ecosystem. While it might seem okay, making sure to do the proper research first is important. Idaho has several introduced game birds besides California quail. Turkey, chukar and gray partridge are all now naturalized species found in our state. They provide exciting hunting and wildlife watching opportunities for Idahoans. Most importantly, they have not caused problems for the other wildlife in their new home.

Photo: CC-BY Fred Leaders



Duckling

Leaving Home



Very young birds can be grouped into two broad categories---precocial and altricial. What group they are in depends upon the kind of bird.

Precocial (pre-CO-shall) birds leave the nest as soon as they hatch and dry off. This is often within a day of hatching. These birds include quail, shorebirds, grouse, ducks, geese, swans, cranes, gulls, and terns. Being able to leave the nest right away is important for ground-nesting birds. A nest of baby birds would make a great meal for a hungry predator.

Precocial birds hatch covered with down. Their eyes are open. They can walk, swim and feed themselves soon after hatching, but still depend upon their parents to keep them safe and warm. The parents keep a careful watch over their youngsters, taking them to places where they can find food and shelter. Precocial baby birds stay warm by snuggling underneath their parents.

The opposite of precocial is altricial (al-TRISH-all). Like you, these youngsters hang around the nest and grow up before they leave home. Songbirds, hawks, owls, herons, hummingbirds, swallows, and woodpeckers are altricial.

Duckling Photo: CC-BY Tony Worrall at Flickr.com

Robin Photo: CC-BY Bill Damon at Flickr.com

When altricial birds hatch, they have very little down. Their eyes are closed, and they are helpless. They depend upon their parents to feed them and keep them warm. Altricial birds like songbirds, grow quickly. They leave the nest in about 10 days to two weeks. Hawks and owls stay longer in the nest, and eaglets may spend three months in their nest. Birds with altricial young hide their nests or build them high in trees or on cliffs to avoid predators. In spring, you can spot these hidden nests before the leaves come out.

Robin feeding her young





Viewing Wildlife

Living with wildlife in your neighborhood can be fascinating. You can learn a lot about animal behavior and how these animals live their lives. It can also give you the chance to practice being a good wildlife viewer.

There's no doubt that seeing wildlife, like a covey of quail in your yard, is exciting! However, you don't want to scare or disturb the animals. So, what do you do? The best thing is to stay indoors. Use your house as a huge wildlife viewing blind. Stay quiet and move slowly as you approach a window. A pair of binoculars can really give you a good view. Help your family members stay quiet and still as you watch the animal. Make sketches or take photos of the animal or write some notes about what it is doing.

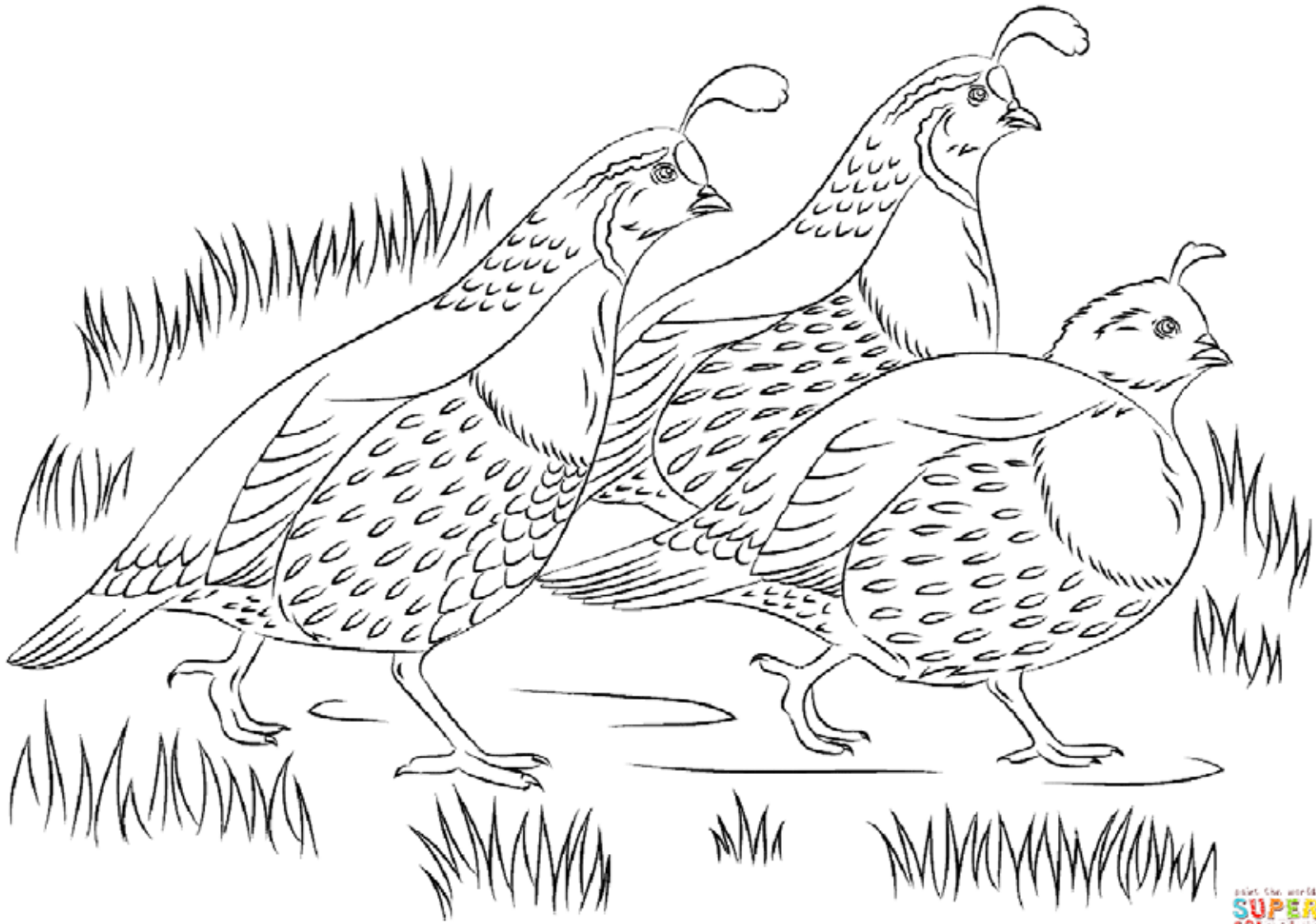
Using a blind and being still and quiet are good skills you can use no matter where you watch wildlife. Many wildlife management areas or nature centers have viewing blinds for visitors. Using them helps you observe wildlife without the animals knowing you are present. Viewing

blinds can give you a front-row seat to some pretty cool things!

If you are traveling and see wildlife, your vehicle is a good blind for you and your family. If this happens, make sure to pull off the road and have your parents turn on their hazard lights to warn other drivers. Stay inside the car to watch the animal. Use binoculars if you have them. It's okay to roll down a window if you can remember to be quiet. Wild animals have very good hearing and will hear you talking.

It's important to pay attention to what the animal is doing. This can tell you if the animal is becoming uncomfortable. If the animal suddenly stops what it was doing and becomes restless, it is not comfortable. It might switch its tail, perk its ears toward you, or begin to make alarm calls. These are signs for you to leave slowly and quietly. By doing so, you will not cause the animal stress or make it use valuable energy trying to get away from you. Being a responsible wildlife watcher is the best way to learn about your wild neighbors.

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue!

Send it to: adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov

or

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