



live oaks -and- clown quail

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Photos by Don and Lori Thomas

Hunting one of North America's least known,
most underappreciated game birds.



Sprawling from horizon to horizon, the vast azure space overhead evokes the iconic Big Sky. Lori and I left behind in eastern Montana a month ago. Friends back home tell me the thermometer hasn't risen above zero for days, but here in the Sonoran Desert I actually welcome the morning chill on the shady side of the mountain. In

another hour, it might be too hot for the dogs to smell, and in that heat, I can't carry enough water to keep them going anyway.

I was late to accept electronic locator collars as a substitute for the bronze cowbells I once used to keep track of my pointing dogs in thick cover, but without one we wouldn't be hunting now. We'd be looking for a lost dog, and never mind the birds she's pointing. The monotonous beeping collar belongs to

Maggie, my veteran female wirehair, and it indicates that she's on point somewhere above us. My ears tell me she's a good 200 yards away and straight uphill, as usual. The slope's steep pitch and the unstable rocks underfoot ensure it won't be easy to reach her.

Lori and I break our 20-gauges and confirm their empty chambers. For safety reasons, I won't climb through loose rock like this with a

loaded gun, and if the birds won't hold until we get there, I don't want to shoot them anyway. Mearns quail hunting is all about the dogs—always has been, always will be.

After clawing our way up the slope, we finally spot Maggie, perfectly camouflaged in the dappled light filtering through the oak leaves. By this time Max, our younger male wirehair, has joined the party and honored her point. Maggie's body language announces that the

birds are right there, practically under her nose.

If experience hadn't taught me to trust Maggie, I'm not sure I would believe her. Despite the density of the live oak canopy overhead, the ground cover consists of nothing but sparse grass and rock that couldn't possibly hide a covey of quail. We load our shotguns anyway. Guessing that the nonexistent birds will flush uphill, I motion

Lori into an optimal shooting position, walk in ahead of the dogs, and start kicking the ground.

The explosive covey rise makes me flinch even though I've experienced countless others like it and knew this one was coming all along. Lori's shotgun barks as I concentrate on isolating a male from the blur of feathered bodies hurtling through the oaks and slap off a shot myself. First

impressions suggest that I've killed the bird even though the cover prevented me from seeing it fall. When Lori fires her second barrel, I spot feathers drifting through the air uphill ahead of her. After waiting for a straggler that never appears, I break my shotgun, unload my second barrel, and tell the dogs that the time has come to stop pointing and start fetching.

Our wirehairs have always been effective, if not necessarily stylish, retrievers. Ten minutes later, they are both guzzling happily from their collapsible water bowl as Lori and I sit on a log admiring the results of their handiwork: three dead quail, each of them a polka-dotted, clown-faced male Mearns. I use the dogs' continued panting as an excuse for all of us to linger in the shade before setting off in search of the next covey.



Of Birds and Habitat

Hunters who spend time in Mearns quail territory quickly learn just how tough the Apaches really were. Southeastern Arizona, the heart of Mearns country, consists of flat, arid terrain punctuated by numerous isolated “sky island” mountain ranges rising thousands of feet above the desert floor. The Apaches were mountain people who regarded their lowland-dwelling neighbors with disdain. Their mastery of those winding canyons and steep, rocky slopes enabled them to elude and outfight the combined forces of the American and Mexican military for decades prior to Geronimo's final surrender in 1886.

Characterized by typical desert flora—prickly pear, ocotillo, mesquite, and agave—the open terrain below the mountains supports fluctuating populations of Gambel's and scaled quail (collectively referred to as “desert quail” in Arizona). Hunting for both can be excellent in good years, and while the walking may be long and hot it doesn't have to be punishing. Those willing to accept the mountains' challenge will find desert flora yielding to live oaks as elevation rises. This is Mearns quail habitat, where steep slopes

and tricky footing offer a stark contrast to the easy going in the desert below.

The proper common name for the birds Lori and I were hunting that morning is Montezuma quail, but they also go by fool quail (for their allegedly naïve behavior) and harlequin quail (for their clownish appearance). They are more commonly known, however, as Mearns quail, after Edgar Alexander Mearns, the pioneering biologist who first formally described them. Like his contemporary Elliott Coues, Mearns was an Army surgeon stationed in the desert Southwest. The two men shared a passion for natural history, and while Coues was studying the desert whitetail subspecies that bears his name today, Mearns was busy with my favorite game bird and nearly a dozen other species previously unknown to Western science. Who says doctors don't do anything but make money and play golf on Wednesdays?

Because of their unique habitat requirements and behavior, Mearns quail hunting is distinctly different from the pursuit of other quail including the nearby Gambel's and scalies. Live oaks are the essential component of Mearns cover, not because the quail eat acorns but because they require oak canopy to nest successfully. As with many game bird species, chicks need insects in their diet after hatching, but adult birds feed almost exclusively on oxalis bulbs, which they excavate with their long, clawed toes. These characteristic “diggings” are easy to identify. Since a typical Mearns covey's home range isn't much more than 20 acres, when you find such signs, birds should be nearby.

Mearns quail are ground nesters that typically spend the night huddled together on a sidehill midway between ridgetop and canyon floor, relying on their superb camouflage to keep them safe in a predator-rich environment. They keep bankers' hours and seldom move until the ground begins to warm midmorning, at which point they start downhill to dig and feed. Like many experienced Mearns hunters, I like to give the birds time to lay down some scent and seldom head to the field much

before noon. The later I look for them, the more coveys I find.



Hunting Clown Quail

It really is all about the dogs. Absent a capable canine partner, a hunter may well never see a Mearns quail, much less shoot one—a reflection of the birds' willingness to hold still, hide, and let intruders walk right past them without flushing. Of course, this same trait makes them an ideal quarry for pointing dogs. Essential qualities in a good Mearns quail dog include an excellent nose, stamina, the ability to cover a lot of rugged ground, and rock-solid steadiness while whoever is carrying the shotgun labors to reach the point. That often seems to take forever.

Everyone has his or her own favorite gun dog breed, and I would not presume to tell anyone that that choice isn't suitable for Mearns quail. I have hunted Mearns with pointers, setters, shorthairs, and wirehairs and have friends who hunt them successfully with everything from Pudelpointers and Brittans to pointing Labs. While cripples don't run like wounded pheasants, thick cover makes it hard to mark falls accurately, and downed birds can be hard to spot on the ground. These factors make retrieving ability a real bonus and help explain my personal enthusiasm for versatile breeds like wirehairs.

I know a number of experienced hunters who share my opinion that Mearns quail smell different from, or just plain less than other upland birds. I've seen excellent dogs run right past coveys on their first Mearns hunt, and I've also watched veteran retrievers walk over the top of dead Mearns without noticing them. Although it may be tempting to ascribe these performances to poor scenting conditions in hot, dry air, I don't observe the same phenomena on desert quail hunts in surroundings that are even hotter and drier. These same dogs usually do much better once they have a





season or two of Mearns quail under their belts.

I think Mearns quail offer the most challenging wingshooting of any game bird on the continent. Imagine climbing through chukar terrain to shoot at birds whizzing through ruffed grouse cover while flying as erratically as woodcock. As with all true covey birds, the initial rise requires the hunter to isolate one bird from a dozen or more and focus on that bird alone—never an easy task, especially if you are trying to shoot nothing but males. While there is no legal requirement to do so, dropping a strikingly patterned cock bird always feels more gratifying than killing a drab hen, and letting the females fly on also makes sense biologically.

Mearns quail are very fast on the wing, and the cover they inhabit demands quick reflexes and split-second decisions. Safety must always be the prime consideration, and it's imperative to visualize safe shooting lanes and confirm the location of all dogs and hunting partners as you approach the point rather than wait until birds are in the air. When that covey finally flushes, there will be a lot of confusion and not much time to respond to it.



Desert Caveats

Newcomers to the desert Southwest will likely face hazards with which they may have had little prior experience. There is no substitute for preparation prior to confronting them.

Adequate water supplies are always the prime consideration in backcountry desert travel, especially for hard-working dogs that aren't going to tell you when they're getting dehydrated. I keep mental notes about known surface water sources—if there are any—and plan my hunting routes around them so the dogs can jump in and cool down as well as drink to their hearts' content. I also carry more water than I think I'll need and offer it to the dogs regularly.

Mearns quail habitat is serious snake country. Fortunately, quail season takes place in the winter, when the region's dozen rattlesnake species are largely inactive. While I rarely encounter venomous snakes, I have friends whose dogs have been bitten.

In terms of dog safety, I worry more about javelina, the region's unique, indigenous desert pig. (Biologically they aren't true pigs, but it doesn't hurt to regard them as such.) While javelina rarely attack people, they can be very aggressive toward dogs, and their wicked teeth can inflict a lot of damage. Don't be afraid to make noise while hunting (I think beeping locator collars help keep dogs and hogs out of each other's way), and if you spot javelina or smell their distinctive musky odor, head in another direction.

Thorny desert flora such as cholla and sand burr can be a real problem for dogs in desert quail habitat but are much less abundant in Mearns cover. Still, I carry a hemostat for thorn removal. The most common thorn problem in mountainous terrain arises from cat's claw, which grows up off the ground and is more likely to stick you than the dogs.

Rocky footing is ubiquitous in Mearns habitat and can be hard on dogs' pads. I don't routinely boot my dogs as some friends do, but my wirehairs have toughened their feet during three months of Montana hunting by the time they reach the desert for the winter quail season.

A lot of good quail hunting takes place near the border, and I commonly find tracks, discarded backpacks, and other signs of illegal immigration. I also frequently encounter border patrol agents, whom I have found to be uniformly courteous and pleasant. Border issues are complex and overly politicized, but I don't worry much about them while quail hunting.



The Elusive *Why?*

Describing the game and its habitat, and offering experience-based advice about hunting it, is easy. Explaining why a seasoned hunter would go through all of this to shoot a bird small enough to skewer on a toothpick and serve as an hors d'oeuvre becomes more complicated.

Certain fish and game species acquire a mystique that somehow makes them more meaningful than the sum of their parts. This phenomenon is highly personal, and what arouses that elusive wow factor in one hunter may leave even close outdoor companions indifferent. These special quarries seem to choose us as much as we choose them. For me, the special few are steelhead in the water, bugling elk among big game, and Mearns quail when I reach for my shotgun and summon the dogs from the kennel.

Despite the intangibles, there are reasons for my enthusiasm. Quail season takes place at the time of year when I need someone else's warm weather most. Hunting Mearns keeps me in shape during months when it's easy to forget what that feels like. These birds inhabit a fascinating ecosystem that never exhausts its supply of new flora and fauna to observe and ponder. Most Mearns quail live on public land, eliminating the need to seek access permission.

But to summarize the why in one compressed scene, I would simply ask the reader to join me as I imagine one of my wirehairs frozen on point in a sun-drenched setting far from the nearest road, followed by an explosion of wings, tiny bodies zipping through the oaks, two quick snapshots, and then the outlandish plumage resting in my hand at the end of the second retrieve.

Perhaps best of all, at the end of the day Lori and I get to take the birds home, clean them, grill them over a bed of mesquite coals, and eat them. Dinner doesn't get any better than that—perhaps just because of the way we've earned it.