OUR STRANGEST AND RAREST QUAIL

by

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On a Sunday morning we took a walk in the high pine barrens of Arizona. The trees stood straight and slim with cones and needles of a year gone by at their feet. Bunches of yellow-green southern mistletoe hung among the darker green of the dwarfed oaks and junipers. Some of this pretty parasite seems to be always with the trees. Here and there spring underbrush of young shrubs was bulging with new life, and in the bare places the sun fell soft and warm. There was a sweet smell of balsam and the mountains in the air, and a hushed vacuum of stillness pressed upon one. Even the birds were quiet and shy. A flicker hanging up-and-down on a tree trunk seemed almost embarrassed at the echo of his drumming in the big still room.

As we trudged along in the Sunday peace, it became quite warm, and dropping over a ridge we looked down on a little green gorge that gave the impression of a flowing oasis in all the dryness. All at once we became thirsty and started down, rattling a loose rock here and there, and didn't stop until we were standing at the edge of a little stream running through the green. And then we saw something else. Not only the brook was rippling, but there was a swaying among the grass and undergrowth moving down the canyon, and it was not a breeze. The air was dead still. Then soft dim shadows began to move up the hillside, winding in and out between the shrubs like pale veils- and were gone. The quail had been down to the stream to drink also.

More than once we had met the quail folk thus, and always shy and silent in departing, the flock had given this impression of shadowy elusiveness. And most frequently we had met them near water, for quail, like man, must have water. They must even make their nests not too far from water so that the frail quaillets may reach it soon after they are hatched . Then will they be able to follow their parents off into the dry hot places, scampering here and there like sprites hunting seeds and insects or digging for small lily bulbs, of which they are

very fond.

The habitats of the quail species account for their striking differences in plumage. And perhaps the most striking quail of the Southwest is the dumpy little Mearns or "fool quail" with his camouflaged "wall-paper pattern" coat. He straggles through the hilly pine regions of central Arizona, southern New Mexico, and central Texas. His face is grotesquely streaked in black and white like an Indian's at a war dance, his crest a soft fawn with a dash of black, his back pale brown with black and white stripes, under parts medium dark brown and black, wings with black spots, and sides like long panels marked by heavy white spots. His mate is dressed in softer and less dramatic tones with a pinkish-brown head and no stripes, back mottled in black, brown and lavender streaked with white, under parts light cinnamon with a lavender touch, breast and sides streaked and speckled. Imagine the brown-fronted Mearns on the sand colored treeless desert or the wide open cactus stretches where the pale blue scaled quail melts into the landscape. But in the mixed grassy valleys and rocky ravines Mearns is a picture painted on his own splotchy wall. Here he vanishes before your eyes.

His habit of lying close and taking flight only when about to be stepped on has brought him the name of "fool quail," and by this means he hides to the last minute his conspicuous dark vest. When a Mearns senses discovery, he quickens his pace, compresses his plumage, and lifts his head high, spreading out his crest in a half mushroom. Of the several striking quail of the Southwest, this bird seems to be depend for his safety on his protective coloration more than any other. An instance is recalled by one observer where one of these birds squatted on a log near the trail that a pack train was following. So well did the colors of his back and sides blend with his surroundings that some fifteen pack mules and horsemen passed without seeing or disturbing him. Many birds knowingly depend upon "freezing" as much or more than melting into their backgrounds.

One of the principal articles of the Mearns' diet is lily bulbs, probably Cyperus, according to Vernon Bailey. They also hunt acorns and pinyon nuts,

and in addition seeds and spines of prickly pear, acacia, seeds of legumes and spurges, grass blades, berries of mountain laurel, arbutus and cedar, and such insects as weevils, caterpillars, bugs, crickets, and grasshoppers. Mr. Bailey started a pair of these birds at an altitude of about eight thousand feet where they had been scratching under the pine trees. In the freshly scratched ground he found a "quantity of membranacious shells of a little bulb and several of the bulbs." He ate one of these and found it good- starchy, juicy, crisp, and of a nutty flavor. The quail had dug two or three inches deep in the hard ground and seemed to find plenty of bulbs. (Mr. Bailey found none by digging in new ground, nor did he find the plant which bore them.)

Unlike the Gambel and scaled quails, the Mearns does not gather in large flocks. Though well distributed, the birds are nowhere abundant. J. Stokley Ligon, who is an authority on the quails of the Southwest, has estimated that there are usually about six in a bunch, though they range from two to twelve. He says that food, character of breeding season, and deep winter snows probably combine at times to reduce them to the verge of extermination over great areas. A variety of natural enemies also affect their abundance, the Cooper hawk being considered their worst enemy and responsible for the small broods reared. But the predatory animals are also important factors in their existence. One year in the center of the Mearns' distribution in the Black Range in New Mexico, while the quail were protected by the rank vegetation of a good season, they were also profiting by four years of active trapping of skunks, bobcats, and foxes. (One trapper had a record of forty-five foxes in four nights, and forty-one bobcats in a year.)

One other situation is affecting upland game birds. Since the game commissions of the West are making every effort to propagate and release birds like the China pheasant so that the sportsmen will have more to hunt, the records show that many of our native game birds like grouse and quail have been decreasing in numbers. Very little has been done in raising and releasing these birds to off-set the loss. The only chance of conserving them is to close the hunting season or set aside certain parts of the different states as reservations

where the grouse and quail live.

Only one species of quail was a natural inhabitant of the eastern states, the bob-white, which has now been introduced and become the "farmer's friend " in the greater portion of the country. In the Southwest he is represented by the Texas bob-white. Beside the Mearns quail, there are two others commonly found and seen in large flocks, the well-named scaled quail (also called blue quail and cotton top), and the Gambel quail. The handsome Gambel, locally but incorrectly called California quail, but lighter in tones, may be met in the Lower Sonoran desert region of southern California, southern Nevada, Arizona, southwestern Utah, and from southwestern New Mexico to the Rio Grande and El Paso region of Texas south into Mexico. He loves the quail brush and creosote, the hot mesquite valleys and slopes, the palo verde thickets and patches of prickly pear. It is not generally found so far from water as the scaled quail which eats more juicy insect food, but at times both are seen in the same landscape. It seems most at home in inhabited regions about small farms, in the alfalfa fields, and sometimes nests in the vineyards. Old and young may be seen by hundreds in the valleys and sandy places.

The natural food of the scaled or blue quail and its tameness about houses show how important it will become to the agriculturist in the development of the country if propdrly protected and encouraged to take an active part in keeping down weed and insect pests on cultivated land. This bird may be seen loitering around the ranch house and perching on the brush woodpile like domestic fowl. This quail whose life is spent in the strong sunlight of the arid cactus, mesquite, and greasewood valleys is the palest of its family, its bluish tones presenting a striking contrast to the dark ones of the Mearns quail that lives in ~~in humid forested~~ regions,- the Mearns, those rare whispering spirits of the pine barrens.