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Quail are curious birds to this upland hunter. Small, with a feather headdress that makes them look like a miniature member of a royal guard, they run for cover as a first defense, then burst into the air without warning. Even when our English setter, Percy, pins a covey, and we have the time to set up and then flush the birds, their sudden flurry makes my heart race. It takes a cool head, despite the adrenaline rush, to put one in the back pouch of my hunting vest.

By LISA BALLARD

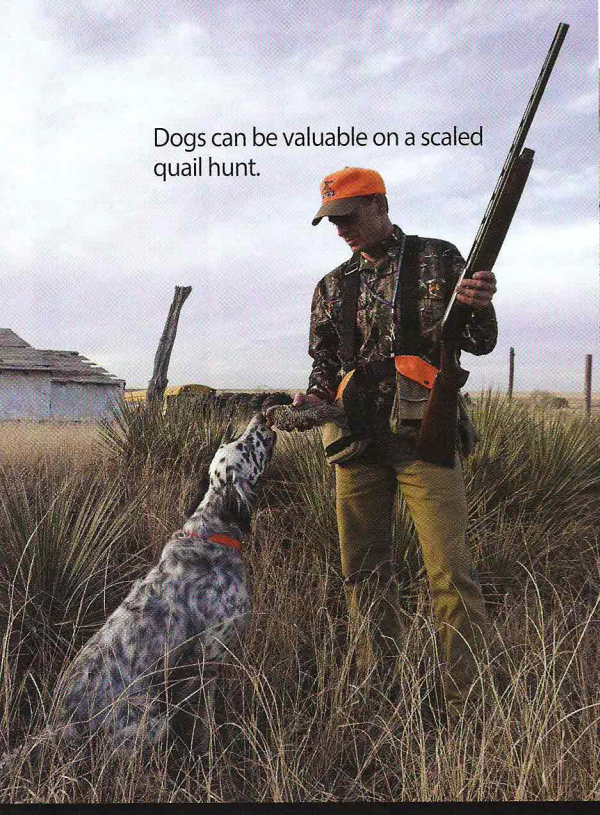


HUNTING JUNK

**A quest for scaled quail in
southeastern Colorado.**

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Dogs can be valuable on a scaled quail hunt.



SCALED QUAIL DETAILS

Description: A plump, short gamebird with blue-gray wings and a light-colored, cotton-like tuft on its head. Its distinctive breast and neck feathers are buff with black tips that look like fish scales.

Size: 9 to 14 inches from the tip of its beak to the end of its short tail.

Wingspan: 15 inches.

Average Weight: 6 ½ ounces.

Native Range: Southwestern Kansas west to southeastern Arizona and south into Mexico.

Nest: A depression on the ground, lined with grass.

Egg description: White with light brown speckles.

Brood size: 5 to 16. Chicks fledge quickly after hatching and can forage for food. They reach adult size in about 15 weeks.

Habitat in Colorado: Sand sagebrush, yucca stands, open pinyon-juniper shrublands, cholla grasslands.

Food: Seeds, including Russian thistle, wild sunflower and mesquite, but rarely grass seed. They also eat forbs, berries and insects, especially during spring and summer (an important source of water).

All three types of North American quail are found in Colorado, though none of them are particularly widespread. Gambel's quail inhabit small areas on the western side of the state. Northern bobwhite quail can be found in limited pockets in eastern Colorado, and scaled quail are in southeastern Colorado. Over my 30 years afield, I've had opportunities to hunt bobwhite and Gambel's quail, but never scaled quail, perhaps because I have an aversion to snakes and cactuses.

These blue-gray birds, sometimes called blue quail, cottontops or desert quail, are tougher than me. They live among the razor-sharp yucca and prickly cholla cactus, often miles from a water source, but if one wishes to bag the trifecta of Colorado's quail species, the arid acres of the state's southeastern grasslands are the best place to find them.

Last November, my husband, Jack, and I headed south with Percy, to look for scaled quail on a do-it-yourself hunt. Outfitted with our shotguns, several gallons of water, a cooler of snacks, a GPS and a Colorado road atlas, our destination, the Comanche National Grasslands, near the Oklahoma border, was new territory for both of us.

Comanche National Grasslands. Situated at elevations from 3,900 feet to 6,200 feet, the 463,373-acre Comanche National Grasslands is split into two sections: Timpas, south of La Junta, and Carrizo, south of Springfield. It's a dry steppe and short-

grass prairie perforated by a few rocky canyons. It's nearly desert. Only 12 to 17 inches of rain sprinkle the region per year — on a good year. Last year was drier than normal, which was especially tough on scaled quail.

Drought is a quail killer, lowering chick survival rates and decreasing winter food sources, mainly seeds, which can lead to starvation. We knew we would need to work extra hard to find birds. A patchwork of private and government-owned lands, we also needed to pay attention to our location, though access

turned out to be easy to find and plentiful.

As we drove along the grid of dirt roads, looking for sections of public or walk-in land, we spotted a surprising amount of wildlife for such a dry environment. Prairie dogs posed by their holes as we rambled by. A mule deer buck stotted alongside a shelter belt, and a roadrunner strode across the road in front of us. Then, seeing a sign for Picture Canyon, a "must-see" landmark in the Comanche National Grasslands, we took the turn to check out the prehistoric petroglyphs on the rocks and take a break for lunch.

The grasslands are named for the Comanche Indians, who inhabited the region during the latter half of the 1700s. However, they were not the first people to eke a living from this arid place. Archeologists believe some of the drawings on the rocks in Picture Canyon date back 8,000 years to hunter-gatherers who lived here in rock shelters. By 1000 A.D., the agriculture-based Apishipa tribe migrated to the region, only to be displaced by the horseback-riding Apaches, who were then pushed out by the Comanches.

During the 1800s, wagon trains along the Sante Fe Trail passed through the region. Then, in 1871, the first nonnative settlers, 11 people from New Mexico, came back to settle along the Purgatory River. Other homesteaders followed, turning the tracts of the prairie into ranchland and broomcorn. When the Dust Bowl drought of the 1930s bankrupted many



The distinct feathers of the scaled quail give it its name.

pioneer families, the Federal government bought up the land, eventually creating the Comanche National Grasslands in 1960.

Hunting the Grasslands. We stopped our pickup by an American flag and a sign marking the remains of the Roscoe W. and Ethyl Goff cattle ranch. The couple established their homestead here in 1908. Curious about the place, and knowing that scaled quail often hid among the ruins of an old house or barn, we grabbed our shotguns.

We walked under the old crossbeam on the now-grassy driveway, trying to imagine what life was like here more than 100 years ago. Two crumbling walls of a cabin beckoned to our right beyond a dead tree. The walls were thick, made from oversized bricks undoubtedly dried from the local earth. A large cracked patch of bleached adobe covered one of the walls.

We walked around the old cabin site, intrigued as much by the debris that lay around the foundation as by the chance of shooting birds. After circling the cabin, we walked toward a dead tree across what was likely the Goff's backyard. Percy, ever vigilant in his search for birds, sniffed here and there, but without much enthusiasm. We found no quail roosting among the ruins, so we moved on.

We repeated the drill a number of times in other parts of the Grasslands, poking around an old bus, a rusted-out tractor, a pile of old boards, a tumble-down barn . . . How odd to hunt around junk!

After tromping a dozen miles or so, we were ready to quit for the day. As we drove through the small town of Welch, looking for gas and something cold to drink, Jack thought he spotted a quail-like bird amidst a weedy yard full of wreckage on our right. He pulled over. A sign on a post said it was a walk-in area.

We carefully stepped over a gnarl of ancient, rusty barbed wire, then spread out on either side of the junk pile. *Zzzzzt!* The back of my leg accidentally touched a wire that snaked off the ground. It was still hot!

"I'm done for today," I declared. Tired, thirsty and now nursing a slight burn behind my knee, I turned to go back to our truck.

Bang!

At Jack's shot, I quickly spun back toward the pile of antique vehicle parts in time to see Percy bound toward a thigh-high bush. A minute later, he spit a cotton-topped, blue-gray quail into Jack's hand. Jack smiled with satisfaction as he raised the bird in the air for me to see.

The rest of the small covey had dispersed, but they had not flown far. Re-energized, we immediately knew with what junkpile to start tomorrow.

When it comes to bird hunting in Colorado, there's nothing quite like scaled quail. They're worth going afield for, if only for the experience of looking for them in a unique environment where public land and walk-in sections are plen-

12 TIPS FOR HUNTING SCALED QUAIL

Here are a dozen things to keep in mind to increase your odds of finding this tasty game bird in its hot, arid habitat:

1. Bring water for both you and your dog.
2. Bring small pliers to remove cactus from your dog's paws, then rub anti-septic on the spot(s). Consider booties if your dog will tolerate them.
3. Be prepared to walk a lot, up to a dozen miles in a day.
4. Target structures on the landscape, not only shrubs and cactus, but also abandoned vehicles, junk piles and the perimeter of crumbling buildings.
5. Wear cactus-resistant pants and footwear.
6. Wear a lightweight hunting vest and cap. Temperatures can hit 85 degrees F, even in late fall.
7. Hunt at sunrise. It's cooler, and the birds are more active.
8. Use a lighter shotgun (20g. or 28g.). You'll carry it more than shoot it.
9. Take your time when a covey flushes to pick out a single bird, rather than "flock shooting." They're not fast fliers.
10. Pay attention. They flush unannounced (no cackle). If a covey flushes, many hunters hesitate, surprised, then shoot behind the bird.
11. Bring a compact lightweight shovel, or leather gloves, to clear cactus away from a wounded quail, which will head to the thickest cactus cover.
12. Watch for snakes, particularly early in the season.

tiful. When precipitation levels are normal, they can be bountiful, flushing in large coveys. During drier times, it can be challenging to find them, but immensely satisfying when you do. They're attractive and delicious to eat. All good reasons to hunt junk! 🐾

A regular contributor to Colorado Outdoors, Lisa Ballard is an award-winning freelance writer and photographer. She cleans her shotguns in Red Lodge, Montana, but explores bird covers throughout the Rockies with her husband, Jack, and English setter, Percy. www.LisaBallardOutdoors.com.