

90/94

Article scheduled for 10/94 issue.
call Jean with corrections ASAP.
(800) 227-2224 X 5290

October 1994
TRACKS IN THE SAND
by Datus Proper

✓
THE TIME FOR ESCAPE comes when days are getting longer, but not fast enough. You know that eventually the snow will melt into the ground, and grow cover for the next generation of pheasants and grouse, but all this will happen without your constant attention. You roll your mind in the good smells of the hunting season just past. You tell your spouse that the new pup's sixth month is a critical stage, during which she needs to stop pointing mice and start pointing real wild Gambel's quail. And then you load your truck and head south.

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Dennis Kavanagh and I made our break in January, driving through a triad of barriers—snowy mountains, mile-deep canyons, and smoggy sunbelt cities. Dennis spotted the first birds, as usual. He guides hunters up north and has learned how to find things in nature. Or maybe he was born with the knack. He can hunt in circles all day, and then pause, stroke his red beard, and point out the shortest route back to the truck. He knows where the Hungarian partridge will land on the prairies, flush after flush, and where sage hens bunch up after the first rain of autumn. And he saw our first Gambel's quail beside a road in the Sonora desert.

Three birds tipped their topknots back over their heads and scooted in front of our truck like toys on wheels. Other quail followed one by one, three by three. Dennis probably got a count, but I did not. The setting made it hard to focus on the actors.

There was that red-orange cliff above us. It was awkward, even if we took it as sculpture—outlandish and intrusive and sublime. The rock was, moreover, not just a lump of scenery that happened to be there. The limestone that formed the cliff had been built from the bodies of our remote ancestors, tiny animals falling to the bottom of an ancient sea 250 million years ago. Movements of the earth's plates had lifted the compacted seabed, and wind had scoured its softer strata, but a fossil record was still up there in the layers. We would

be hunting under a tombstone. Or perhaps a monument to life.

Early next morning, we parked by a creaking, clanking windmill. A score of western bluebirds rose from the water tank, brighter than desert sky, and then the quail ran out, undulating over sand, so numerous that their voices combined in a musical moan. We started after them with the dogs that needed cool temperatures—the heaviest of Dennis's two English setters and my middle-aged pointer, a German shorthair. The pup stayed behind, yipping.

We did not get a covey point, but then the quail were not a covey. They were a horde splitting around barrel cactus and mesquite, disappearing under creosote bushes. They flushed in waves, one spooking the next.

I followed a group of some three dozen birds. Dennis pursued a different part of the flock which, he told me later, was twice as big. None of us were accustomed to such numbers. I watched my dog push out one quail while trailing another and called him in for a drink, making him sit till he stopped panting. Then he worked the singles as they had to be worked, carefully. The birds had left little scent when they dived into clumps of catclaw acacia.

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The trick was to ease off. The birds flushed near the pointer's nose and buzzed away, wings blurred, looking small even for quail because they sleeked their feathers down. With allowances for scale, however, all this commotion did not translate into high speed; the pheasants back home were faster and got out of range more quickly. The Gambel's quail used no cover in flight, either—just flew away against cloudless sky or pebbled desert. I would bring the gun up slowly, swing its muzzles ahead of the fuss, and watch Big Dog bound out for the retrieve, ears happy.

Within half an hour, I had six birds—all I could use—and called my dog to heel. On our way back to the truck, he kept scenting quail and making brief dashes to the side, using private initiative, knowing that a staunch point would erase all sin. If I had continued shooting—and hitting—a limit of fifteen birds would have been in my vest before the sun was high.

Dog and human do not always hit it rich in the arid southwest, mind you. Before you plan an expedition for

Gambel's quail, you should know that they evolved in a boom-and-bust environment. After a dry winter, they may not even attempt to nest. Given heavy winter rains, however, the pairs produce big broods, and 80 percent of the next season's population may be young of the year.

It is hard to believe today, but some Arizona valleys once contained flocks of Gambel's quail numbering in the tens of thousands. That was before my immediate ancestors, and yours, turned year-round streams into dry washes, before irreplaceable veins of underground water were exhausted to keep lawns green.

Dennis and I visited quail country exactly one year after heavy rains had revived the dead rivers (though only temporarily). We sat on our shady tailgate and thanked the desert for giving us a retrospective. We ate our sandwiches, drank our sun tea, plucked our birds, and tried to wait out the heat. Couldn't do it. Too excited.

We set off in opposite directions with our lighter dogs. My pup was the daughter of the 60-pound pointer I had run in the morning. At half his weight, she lacked the muscle-mass to overheat, which freed her to chase all the wrong things. She found a javelina first but turned back when I whistled, to my intense relief. (Peccaries, alias javelinas, can do almost as much damage to dogs as can the wild boars they resemble.)

Next Pup chased a jackrabbit, which in turn flushed a covey of quail, and we hunted the singles. I ignored the birds that my baby bird-dog bumped, but shot a few that I kicked up on my own. Shot at them, anyhow. They were harder to hit when they caught me by surprise, and Pup had not figured out the pointing part. I began to wonder. Perhaps I should have started her on feeble pen-raised quail. Perhaps she was not clever enough to learn from nature.

When Big Dog got his turn the next morning, he disappeared for 10 minutes and came back carrying what looked like the stretch version of a raccoon. It was a coati—first one I had seen up close—and it was in perfect condition, except for being dead. My good old pointer, on the other hand, was bleeding from multiple bites on his ears and front feet. Coatis fight in packs and kill even more dogs than the javelinas.

I washed Big Dog's wounds with our drinking water and offered to carry him to the truck. He preferred to look for some quail. The coati had been out of character for him—a way of telling me that he could hunt anything, anywhere, without help from the new pup. When he had worked a covey with no sign of pain, the world around me popped back into focus. Jays were hopping in evergreen oaks, mistletoe drooped from the branches, and a field of snakeweed shone gold at the end of our canyon's funnel.

Big dog did not mind that I missed most of the birds he found. Ammunition bought locally kicked too much for my light shotgun, bringing on a flinch for which I compensated by aiming extra-carefully, which in turn made the quail seem to fly twice as fast. I tried to leave the shooting part to Dennis until the demon left me. The hunting part was as good as ever.

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The eternal quail were there too, in small coveys, and I may have figured out the secret of Dennis's bird sense. He had the knack of looking near his feet and into the distance, more or less at the same time and without stumbling. He would spot three-toed tracks in the sand and keep his big setter working the area till there was a point.

In the hour before dark, a switch flipped in my pup's brain. Her first point could have been mistaken for a pause to inspect for prickles in the rosette at the base of a century plant, but a quail flushed when I walked in. Dennis shot and Pup made an enthusiastic retrieve from inside a coyote's den-hole. By the time we got back to the truck at dark, she had struck two calendar-girl poses. A desert cottontail was responsible for one of them. Her last point was the real thing.

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burrowed, skirt ocotillos, and pivot on threads of scent. None of the threads led to quail, however, and I doubted that she had the concentration to follow faint smells through glorious distractions. In the end, she found the right place for the wrong reason. Ravens were swirling in mating flight over a notch in the skyline and Pup headed for them, curious. Ravens are clever birds, if you want to be scientific, and shamans if you don't.

The notch turned out to be dry granite polished by seasonal rains. I touched the smooth lip of the lowest waterfall, wondering if I could climb it, while Pup crept into a point and made up my mind for me. The covey flushed wild, but one quail swung within range and dropped high on the granite. Pup marked the fall—which surprised me, given all the other birds she might have watched—and scrambled up the rock like a monkey. I sat on the sand and waited till she crawled into my lap for a hug. She dropped a handsome cock quail in my hand and licked my face.

Most of the birds had flown over the ridge and scattered in a jumble of sandstone. I worked my way to the top by wedging myself between boulders, seat on one and feet on the other. Pup needed a boost, and a sling for my shotgun would have helped.

Beyond the ridge was a bowl with enough sand in it to grow prickly pears, green against red stone. I saw quail tracks but none made by cattle or humans. No one else would have been daft enough to hunt up there—not even the cavalrymen chasing Geronimo.

The first quail Pup found in our secret place fell within the bowl, an easy retrieve. The second bounced on a boulder and slipped down a crevice too narrow for anything but a rattlesnake. The demon that made me flinch was gone, displaced by vertigo. The third bird went over a rocky face and Pup plunged after it while one of the ravens circled low, perhaps hoping that the little pointer would kill herself. She made it back with the quail, and that's when we should have quit.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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About 2100 words
plus optional sidebar

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~~call Ben re photos~~

~~See 1 type~~

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Gambel's quail thrive in the
desert -- when it rains.

The time for escape comes when days are getting longer, but not fast enough. You know that the snow will melt into the ground, eventually, and grow cover for the next generation of pheasants and grouse, but all this will happen without your constant attention. You roll your mind in the good smells of the hunting season just past. You tell your spouse that the new pup's sixth month is a critical stage, during which she needs to stop pointing mice and start pointing real wild Gambel's quail. And then you load your truck and head south.

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My puppy ignored the geology, but I had to catch her hind legs as she dived out the window after her first quail.

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For me too, the trick was to ease off. The birds flushed near the pointer's nose and buzzed away, wings blurred, looking small even for quail because they sleeked their feathers down. When you compensated for scale, however, you realized that the commotion did not translate into high speed. The pheasants back home had been getting out of range more quickly. The Gambel's quail used no cover in flight, either -- just flew away against cloudless sky or pebbled desert. I would bring the gun up slowly, swing its muzzles ahead of the fuss, and watch Big Dog bound out for the retrieve, ears happy.

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["Game has always been scarce," wrote José Ortega y Gasset, the philosopher of hunting, and with exceptions that prove the rule, he was right. I have hunted four continents, two Atlantic islands, and various American states, but it took the Sonora desert to show me a hundred-bird flock of upland game.]

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face. ~~The wind was making my eyes water.~~

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(optional sidebar on next page)

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What remains today is the layer-cake geology -- long dead but still the greatest show on earth -- and such wildlife as can make a living around the edges.

In every land there is a season when the best place is elsewhere. For a northerner,
sunken mountains/fill.

And then the quail ran out one by one, three by three, dozen by dozen.

We reached an older world, a place where the old people painted their faith on rocks.

I tried to relax. It was not easy, when the quail were flushing, but the desert was still the best place in the world to be, in January, and the dogs made me happy even when I could not hit the birds they found.

We should have stayed on that piece of desert for the rest of our trip. A hunter should listen to nature, but we had made plans, reservations, artificial constructs of life.

We drove almost to the Mexican border for Mearns' quail, which are not a desert species. They need rain in summer, not winter, and the summer rains had failed, so the Gambel's had to save our day again. Two coveys of them were high in the mountains, Mearns' territory, among evergreen oaks and junipers and little bluestem [] grass.

I ran both of my dogs in the mountains, thinking that pup might decide to point when she saw old dog doing it, but she sneaked in and flushed his birds instead.

Cloud shadows brushed the cliffs, rippling over strata
Our agriculture and urban culture both evolved in humid
regions.

Desert man is not just woods man with a sunburn.

formed by erosion, like everything else in the desert.

The main canyon was lined with snakeweed [] gleaming gold in
the evening sun.

They are a superspecies or -- better -- part of a
supergenous. Those up in the mountains may be of a separate
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became lumpers. We did not, for that matter, see great
differences between Gambel's and cq

We will not see such numbers again, but the species is
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are in the same genus, they are world citizens -- living in
places as far apart as Central Mexico, Patagonia, Hawaii, New
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and we began to joke about having to walk two hours before
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and my pup fetched it from deep in a coyote's hole, keen on
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The quail could take their habitat for granted, but we
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No knight every presented a trophy of battle with more dignity. I accepted the coati, told Big Dog that he need not enter any more tournaments to impress me

Work in the beautiful bones/skeleton from AZ notes.

A Z

It doesn't get dull, with
dogs. ~~They~~ They can find
all the scary things in
the desert as easily as quail.

Layer - like geology.

The greatest show on earth.
(spectacle

Beautiful bones, even when the
feet of legs have eroded.
The six small skeletons, very old,
very beautiful.

~~Joe credit that showed us the queue?~~
~~(Fledged one while running over the~~
~~hill.)~~

The Sleep

Phase 1 - ~~Flint~~

" 2 - ~~Thinking / trying to land.~~

I'm a northerner by metabolism,
better in ~~heat~~ cold than heat,
but it's nice to feel the dry sun
in January & shoot at a bird
at 1000 (even if you miss).

Arizona / Utah

Wind eroding the centuries,
wind-blown sand flows down the
soft strata and shows you the
cabin like face of ~~other~~ mother
nature, striations of the ages.

Morning. Low sun, ~~and shadows~~
sky. ~~Cloud~~ Cloud shadows
painted black or red cliffs of
Navajo sandstone. (The Vermilion
Cliffs.)

Sharp-edged plant zone, ~~Dead~~
Desert to juniper to pinyon
as you climb south to Flagstaff.

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2650
572

188

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The rocks / cliffs frighten
you. They are too high,
too old. Your ~~Shale~~
anxiety is up in those
strata.

No vegetation you recognize,
except junipers. all distant.
New world. Clear air, but soft.

The Stamp. Beat it (?) by
switching to light reloads. Hit
3 out of 4. Might have done better
if I hadn't re-loaded the same
cannon.

(Saw the first quail I hit flying
across the sun. Shot as
it disappeared, trusting my wings,
+ a halo of feathers surrounded
the sun.

But print everywhere was seen.
Why? Number of hunters
supposedly level or declining —
but far more serious ones.
A multi-hundred dog ops at
one motel alone, counting over-
one had 16 dogs.

("Study of great tracks...
no people tracks.")

Dennis knows where birds are because
he keeps one eye on the ground
for tracks & droppings.

Limestone red from iron oxide in
water seepage.

The 3-mile rule: you got to
walk before you get any.
(Mile 03 New York City. ~~all~~
all & 2 both picked singles,
went wrong way, & found carry
only on return.)

Ravens in mating flight over
pycno - top hills.
(Shamans turn into ravens.)

Windmill w/ western bluebirds,
cardinal in a mesquite tree,
+ a flock of quail that
undulate + moaned.

Look for water (windmills,
tanks, wells) on the way. They
concentrate birds.

^(feathers)
Sleek. Looks small + thin

My slump - had use to work the
day running around apaches. Shes
better to be? What gotta to do?

Dec. / Jan. - Bad weather, + before
the tourists.

Lunch / nap by an old windmill
made by the aeromotor w. of
Chicago, Jones (?) spinning,
chain ^{rattling} pumping up + down, clear
deep water spilling into a trough.

The quail on wheels. Little birds with
topknots. Tucked down over their
heads, scuffling along through the
sand.

charcoal-grilled chicken, ~~the~~ cabbage
salad, ice tea, + coffee cake. Love
beat walking.

Sonoran desert. Tips of mountains
protruding from ages of detritus.

- A 2 -

Wherever you come from,
this is a change/different
world,

1+85 Pointing on a ledge over sheer
drop. Granite falls, sandstone
balanced rocks.

(Built up to end of ~~pass~~ supply
line).
Nobly over hunted here.

These birds live on rocks like chuckars,
in swamps like pheasants, and
in overgrazed desert like nothing
else.

They fly uphill, ~~down~~ downhill,
side hill, every which way.

Wishing for a geologist/hunter
to explain every step/layer
to me. Where the history of
time lies exposed.

[Raven quothing by a window.]

Desert takes its turn at being
the most beautiful place in the
world. (Ck tank)

"I saw the ~~main~~ cavey" 35 birds.
"No, I saw it." (70 birds.)

Dams weed, sagebrush yucca,
Lamel cactus, mesquite, acacia,
sagebrush (?) probably pear,
Cane cholla, other cacti, Sagaro,
grass

The greatest concentration of upland
birds I ever saw was in the desert
in January. After hunting on
4 continents + an island.

But not easy to hunt. Evaporate
in the desert sand.

munched w/ pretty galls.
red ^{to} on patrol for rabbits.

Naming / Creating / Living the Desert Finding / Seeing

Wild - ranging dog not needed,
oddly. You'd expect English pointers;
see mostly Shorthair & Brit.
Can ^{easy to spot} fight & singles hard to
sant. So you need a single dog.
Concept with ^{fight} with no dog at all.

Making tracks is what these
goats are good at.

Fight not terribly fast, but
they are very ~~small~~ slim &
their wings are a blur. You
are surprised to find how
close they are when they fall.

Dennis knows where he is in
the canyon, and he knows
where the car is. He also
knows where the goats are -
and all the howl.

Quail tracks. No human tracks.

Title? \rightarrow

middle toe. Century plant? Agave?

Barely cactus w/ a horn hanging on it.

Not a bird that uses cover in the air.

Towers - ag. Indian, pre-gacha

field of gold. Snail wall?

Tess's first point - not long.

#6 shotshell empties - even #4 -

lying around the hills. Flock-shooting?

Rabbits? Quail "hand do kill"?

James plans to do a
profile of Texas bobwhite
living under toughest
condition of any game bird.

re Gambel's.

Bring in the
adventure/expedition.
Duncan remembers cacti,
scooters, birds of prey.

He'll catch the Gator!

1. Open w/ the "abundant game" on
res. Gull'd mist.

2. Slump. Flinch, loss of timing.

3. Raven. You can't tell what they
try play tricks. Can help; can jinx.

4. The Waterfall (dry) casey. Close
w/ Ter on point.

Humbel's

Those near Zim must have
great taste in art.

~~Gen~~

Saw my first Humbel's in
So. Utah, fringe of Zim N.P.

rocks balanced on rocks. No
earthquakes for a 2.000 years.

Stories w/ separate
episodes.

Create breaks in text.

either one-line breaks or
sub titles. But not artificial
sub titles. Saves a 1/2 or 2

of transitional material.

AZ

I'm still not a good
shot, but ~~I'm better than~~
~~I~~ I've learned why I miss
and am not so upset about
it, which means that the
slugs end earlier.

Stephen Jay Gould

enced a different, unanticipated, and most pleasant example of authenticity of use in Sears this morning. (I could not have asked for a better context. The Bay Area, this week, is experiencing a bonanza in authenticity of place—as the Oakland A's and the San Francisco Giants prepare for the first single-area World Series since 1956, when the seventh and last "subway series" of ten glorious childhood years in New York, 1947 to 1956, produced Don Larsen's perfect game and the revenge of my beloved Yankees for their only defeat, the year before, by the Dodgers in their true home in Brooklyn. Think what we would lose if, in deference to October weather and a misplaced sense of even opportunity, the World Series moved from the home cities of full season drama to some neutral turf in balmy Miami or New Orleans.)

I have always gone to Sears with other people and sat at a table. This time I went alone and ate at the counter. I had not known that the counter is a domain of regulars, native San Franciscans on their way to work. One man gets up and says to the waitress, "Real good, maybe I'll come back again sometime." "He's in here every morning," whispers the waitress to me. Another man takes the empty seat, saying "Hi, honey" to the woman on the next stool. "You're pretty early today," she replies. "The works!" he says, as the waitress passes by. "You got it," she replies. A few minutes later, she returns with a plate of pancakes and a dish of scrambled eggs. But first she slides the eggs off the plate onto a napkin, blotting away the butter. "No good for him," she explains. He begins a discussion on the relative merits of cloth napkins and paper towels in such an enterprise. Good fellowship in authenticity of use; people taking care of each other in small ways of enduring significance.

As I present talks on evolutionary subjects all around America, I can be sure of certain questions following any speech: Where is human evolution going? What about genetic engineering? Are blacks really better at basketball? (Both the dumb and the profound share this character of inevitability.) High on the list of these perennial inquiries, I must rank the ecological question—usually asked with compassion, but sometimes with pugnacity: Why do we need to save all these species anyway?

I know the conventional answers rooted in practicality. I even believe in them: you never know what medical or agricultural use might emerge from species currently unknown or ignored; beneficial diversity of gene pools in cultivated species can often be fostered by interbreeding with

Arizona

wild relatives; interconnectedness of ecological webs may lead to dire and unintended consequences for "valued" species when "insignificant" creatures are rubbed out. Still, I prefer to answer with an ethical, more accurately a viscerally aesthetic, statement espoused by nearly all evolutionary biologists as a virtual psychic necessity for wanting to enter the field in the first place: we relish diversity; we love every slightly different way, every nuance of form and behavior—and we know that the loss of a significant fraction of this gorgeous variety will quench our senses and our satisfactions for any future worth contemplating in human terms (potential recovery of diversity several million years down the road is too abstract and conjectural for this legitimately selfish argument). What in the world could possibly be more magnificent than the fact that beetle anatomy presents itself in more than half a million separate packages called species?

I have always been especially wary of "soft" and overly pat analogies between biological evolution and human cultural change. (Some comparisons are apt and informative, for all modes of change must hold features in common; but the mechanisms of biological evolution and cultural change are so different that close analogies usually confuse far more than they enlighten.) Nonetheless, aesthetic statements may claim a more legitimate universality, especially when an overt form rather than the underlying mechanism of production becomes the subject of our consideration. If you feel aesthetic pleasure in proportions set by the "golden section," then you may gain similar satisfaction from a nautilus shell or a Greek building despite their maximally different methods and causes of construction. I do, therefore, feel justified in writing an essay on the moral and aesthetic value of diversity both in natural and in human works—and in trying to link the genesis and defense of diversity with various meanings of authenticity. (In addition, *Natural History* has been breaking ground within its genre for many years by including the diversity of human works under its mantle—and by recognizing that the life of modern cities belongs as firmly to natural history as the overphotographed and overromanticized ways of the few human groups still living as hunters and gatherers in pristine habitats.)

(Finally, if I may make a terrible confession for a working biologist and a natural historian: I grew up on the streets of New York, and I suppose that one never loses a primary affection for things first familiar—call it authenticity of place if

you wish. I do think that America's southwestern desert, in the four corners region around Monument Valley, is the most sublime spot on earth. But when I crave diversity rather than majesty, I choose cities and the products of human labor, as they resist conformity and embody authenticity of object, place, and use. My motto must be the couplet of Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"—from the happy rather than the pensive side:

Towered cities please us then
And the busy hum of men.

Several years ago I visited India on a trip sponsored by Harvard's Natural History Museum. My colleagues delighted in arising at 4:00 A.M., piling into a bus, driving to a nature reserve, and trying to spot the dot of a tiger at some absurd distance, rendered only slightly more interesting by binoculars. I yearned to be let off the bus alone in the middle of any bazaar in any town.)

Natural diversity exists at several levels. Variety permeates any nonclonal population from within. Even our tightest genealogical groups contain fat people and thin people, tall and short. The primal folk wisdom of the ages proclaims the enormous differences in temperament among siblings of a single family. But the greatest dollop of natural diversity arises from our geographical divisions—the differences from place to place as we adapt to varying environments and accumulate our distinctiveness by limited contact with other regions. If all species, like rats and pigeons, lived all over the world, our planet would contain but a tiny fraction of its actual diversity.

I therefore tend to revel most in the distinctive diversity of geographical regions when I contemplate the aesthetic pleasure of differences. Since I am most drawn to human works, I find my greatest joy in learning to recognize local accents, regional customs of greeting and dining, styles of architecture linked to distinctive times and places. I also, at least in my head if not often enough in overt action, think of myself as a watchdog for the preservation of this fragile variety and an implacable foe of standardization and homogenization.

I recognize, of course, that official programs of urban layout and road building must produce more elements of commonality than a strict aesthetic of maximal diversity might welcome. After all, criteria of design have a universality that becomes more and more pressing at upper limits of size and speed. If you have to move a certain number of cars through a given region at a stated speed, the road

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SOMETHING SCARCE

This is the oldest, oddest,
and smallest trophy.

Use 71
In every land there is a season when the best place is elsewhere. In the north, the time for escape comes when the days are getting longer, but not fast enough. The snow will, in time, melt into the ground and feed the springs that flow into trout streams, but all this will happen without your constant attention. You remember the fluffy knee-high grass of autumn fields and think that if you could visit such a place now, you would roll in it like a horse and then get up and shake and trot around. And then you start looking at maps.

Dennis Kavanagh and I started looking right after the holidays. We told ourselves and our wives (convincing at least the former) that our young bird dogs needed more work. This ruled out a visit to steamy tropical beaches. Besides, any impoverished imagination can visit a resort hotel. Organized tourism is for change, not escape; you have to hunt for the real thing. Escapes are inaccessible *, improbable, natural, beautiful, scarce.

[The Mearns * quail may be the scarcest bird that can be hunted in the United States. It must certainly have the most restricted range -- a strip of Arizona * miles deep and a corner of New Mexico, both right along the border with old Mexico. I want this place all to myself and have no interest in drumming up business for the merchants of the area, though they could use some. I will therefore tell you both the tough and the tender of the little bird that lives there. When you hear the hard part you will, perhaps, make this an escape of the imagination -- which is the best kind anyhow. If you do not need golden trout or Montana grayling, you will not yearn for Mearns.] If, however, you happen next year to see my little white truck with two dog cages parked under a live oak * at the mouth of a shady canyon, please drive on and hunt somewhere else. Gunshots echo far in this ~~quiet~~ land.]

[The Mearns has a triad of defenses. The first is a ring of higher mountains to the north; they stopped the glaciers every time. Then there is the world's leading museum of sculpture,

which some call desert. This has stoped travelers for centuries. Having missed all of the ice and most of the water, the desert's spires and buttes are as sharp as the gates of another world. When you pass through them the final line of defense is a loose ring of big new sunbelt cities, and these, though furrowed by highways, have caught more travelers than nature's barriers. I commend these cities to you for a vacation. They have all the comforts of home. On the way through, however, Dennis and I turned the truck's air conditioner to "max" (which recirculates air rather than sucking in big-city comforts) and drove on to the border country.

The Mexican border is, of course, down (as in south), and the part you hear about is also low in altitude. That is the part in which you will, I hope, pause to chase abundant Gambel's * and scaled quail. They will keep you away from what I want -- because the Mearns are not, as you might have supposed, desert birds. They live in mountains that are exceedingly old, modestly high, and steeper than you may like, especially in the parts that hold my birds. These mountains attract rain like most others, but unlike most they are watered in midsummer, * which means that the native bunchgrass grows late, which in turn means that January seems like autumn. The grass is sun-cured by then but still rising to your knees, sometimes your waist. When you look down at it you feel like September in northern Minnesota, or October in

Montana, or November in Virginia. There is no better season.

For my sins I have been shipped all over the world, and the Mearns quail is the only bird I have met that is adapted to summer rains -- rains that would kill the chicks of most upland game. This is also the only gallinaceous bird I have seen with an extra-long toe and claw. It needs these because its staple diet is bulbs or tubers (anyhow, things that look like miniature Irish potatoes). ^{They} These grow in moist soil under canyon live oaks. ^{in steep side canyon} Before noon the quail do not feed much, which is also Irish, but in the evening their crops bulge with tiny spuds. And I am just starting the list of the unexpected.

The Mearns is upside-down. Seen from above, both male and female are as camouflaged as bobwhites, except that the feathers have a rosy sheen matching the native grass. When you look under the cock's drab coat, however, you see a brilliant chestnut shirt, glossy black trousers, and ebony vest with white polkadots -- the full Cleveland. The black and white carry up into a clown mask, giving the cock the best of many aliases: * harlequin quail. He would be conspicuous to predators looking upwards, but then Dennis and I never saw a Mearns in the air unless we forced one up, in which case it got out of sight promptly.

You begin to see, now, why I am not quite as reluctant as I might be to tell you about the high country on the border. There are only two ways to see a Mearns quail, both exciting. The first

is to ride a horse into the canyons. You will pass in and out of the shade of oaks, through fluffy grass, around red-and-gray-and-green manzanitas, and into a state of benevolent somnolence, at which time your horse will step into a covey and all participants will become airborne [with a great deal of noise.*] By the time you have dusted yourself off and checked for broken bones your horse will have turned into the thunder of distant hoofs. * You will have learned why another of the Mearns' aliases is "walk-home bird." (I make that one up myself.)

(Good year / bad year / difference)
The better way is with a dog. On your own, you can walk through Mearns country for a week without seeing a bird; a friend of ours did. The quail do not run far -- just far enough to get out of your way and hunker down. Our friend was a good hunter accompanied by a pup who was too young to figure these things out. Dennis and I talked to other hunters who had done little better.

Our own start was slow enough. We spent half the first day in country that lacked the moist slopes Mearns need. The other half we spent in cover that had too many boot tracks, but it had quail scratchings too, so we kept on. These birds till a lot of ground for their spuds. They may add fertilizer, because the scratchings have a smell that even I could pick up, sometimes. I suspect this of being another of the Mearns' unique defense mechanisms: put enough ~~smell~~ ^{scent} in one place to blow a predator's

circuits, then run off a hundred yards and hide ^{under} an oak. It takes awhile for a dog to learn ^{what} ~~more about this than~~ a coyote. ~~count~~

We called the first day a learning experience. My pup Huckleberry, a German shorthaired pointer, found two singles and bumped them. Dennis's English setter bitch, Gopher, tried to point the scratchings from a distance. That's the way she handles partridges in Montana. Dennis guides upland hunters and Gopher is good at what she knows.

V. grotte You could say that we did not get anything that first day, except that we hiked around the corner of a steep slope and found both pups cooling off in the only remaining pool of an intermittent stream. They had broken the last night's skim ice and were as happy as two kids on a resort beach. Gopher is pretty, dainty, anorexic, and so white that she is invisible on the snow back home. Huck is a long-legged beach boy, muscled, brown, and daring. These dogs got a swim while Dennis and I got a laugh.

(Next morning we spent the cool hours driving around for maps, but the dogs found coveys during the rest of the day. We humans shot nine birds and wanted no more. In the days that remained for us,) we averaged about four covey finds per day. Notice that I am stressing dog work rather than shooting. If I told you that we shot three birds per covey, we'd sound greedy, and if I told you the truth we'd sound like poor shots. Hitting Mearns quail is a little like hitting ruffed grouse while

standing on a thirty-degree slope. [The trick is to have one hunter stand in the clear while the other moves in for the flush.] The birds are almost always under or close to an oak with branches that sweep the ground. They flush on the opposite side of the tree from the hunter who moves in on them, and he often gets no shot at all.

Ed Epsen's * Gingersnapper * showed us how to do the thing right. Ed hunts with the same shorthairs that win field trials for him. He took us to a canyon that lots of hunters know about; another bunch was hunting while we were there, but they didn't do much shooting. They didn't have Ginger. Ed and Dennis and I strolled along the bottom while Ginger hunted the lower half of the canyon's side. When her bell stopped, we moved in. It stopped six times that morning. Ginger had birds each time -- between two and eight of them. She stood while we flushed them and shot. Then she stood while we kicked out any remaining singles and missed them too. Then Ed released her and she retrieved our bird, if we'd hit one. She would have looked for singles if allowed to do so. [Even Ginger, however, could not have found air-washed Mearns quail right away; they do not put down scent for a few minutes.] We chose to let them alone.

Ed told us that quail which have not been hunted use the grassy, open bottoms and tops of canyons. Ed's Ginger showed us that the birds are far from endangered, but she also showed us a

population that had been scattered and pushed into the jungles on steep slopes. Their country is too attractive: small, pretty, and pleasant in the winter. The birds are small, pretty, and pleasant too. A limit of fifteen would be a sad spectacle -- and a ruthless shot with an experienced pointer could get that many in the early part of the season. Ed has it right when he says that these are trophy birds. A good bag is a big, mature cock with his carnival suit fluffed out for a rosy-tan hen, both mounted in a glass case.

Mind you, what I am passing out is anecdotal, not research. If there is any good research paper on the Mearns, Ed Epsen has not been able to find it.* I hope that you will look on this story as useless information -- curious observations about the most curious little gamebird we have. But if you do go hunting, please don't shoot more than you can ^{eat, which is 2 if you trust the right} ~~count on the fingers of one~~ ~~your hand~~. The Mearns has had time to evolve its quirks, I suppose, because its habitat has not been troubled by climate changes over the ages. In that sense the population is a specialized relict.* When you hunt these birds you escape to the best place of all, backwards in time.

Two innocent pups showed us where to look. They learned to divide up the side of a canyon and comb it. At first Gopher would report that birds were in the area and we would call Huck in to close the deal. On the last day, though, she pinned two coveys on

Something Scarce

Proper

her own. The first had more than a dozen birds, so we looked for the singles. Huck found one, retrieved it after my shot, and found another on the way back. I shot that one too, and the pup brought me two cock birds at once, clown masks sticking out of opposite sides of his mouth.

That's one of the things I would list if the teacher asked me to report What I Did On My Vacation. Then I would pull my trophies from a day pack and show them off. There would be the tiny four-point antler shed by a Coues * deer. There would be Huckleberry, holding a covey for fifteen minutes while I looked for him. There would be empty shells, spring water flowing from javelina tracks, and an eagle circling a red mountain. There would be Gopher, pointing back to an age between glaciers. There would be one very old cock bird with his vest showing.

Use a beeper!

End

Book Title: Trophy Hunting

Mearns' leftovers

The secret is a dog that can also suffer skillfully. It must search far in warm weather, trail birds from their digs to their resting cover, hold till you get there, and retrieve without fail. The Mearns' quail was designed for a pointing dog.

[Ed does not guide for a living, but other Arizonans do, and a few of them have serious dogs.]

I want this place all to myself and have no interest in drumming up business for the merchants of the area, though they get plenty and appreciate it.

If you do not need morels [] or grayling, you may not yearn for Mearns.

In every land there is a season when the best place is elsewhere. In the north, the time for escape comes when the days are getting longer, but not fast enough. The snow will, in time, melt into the ground and ^{grow bird/plant/flower cover,} feed the springs that flow into trout streams, but all this will happen without your constant attention. You remember the grass of autumn fields and think that if you could visit such a place now, you would roll in it like a horse and then get up and shake and trot around. And then you start looking at maps. You tell yourself and your wife ^{the} your pup's

talent will be blighted without more work. This rules out a visit to steamy tropical beaches. Besides, organized tourism is just another spectator sport. You have to hunt for the real thing. Escapes are ^{plano,} inaccessible *, improbable, natural, beautiful, scarce.

If you do, you will have to penetrate a triad of defenses. The first is a ring of higher mountains to the north; they stopped the glaciers every time. Then there is the world's leading museum of sculpture, which some call desert. This has stopped travelers for centuries. Having missed all of the ice and most of the water, the desert's spires and buttes are as sharp as the gates of another world. When you pass through them the final line of defense is a loose ring of big new sunbelt cities, and these, though furrowed by highways, have caught more travelers than nature's barriers. I commend these cities to you for a vacation. They have all the comforts of home.

But if you continue, you will reach the Mexican border. It is, of course, down (as in south), and the part you hear about is also low in altitude. That is the part in which you will, I hope, pause to chase abundant Gambel's * and scaled quail. They will keep you away from what I want -- because the Mearns are not, as you might have supposed, desert birds. They live in mountains that are exceedingly old, modestly high, and steeper than you may like, especially in the parts that hold my birds. These mountains attract rain like most others, but unlike most they are watered in midsummer, * which means that the native bunchgrass grows

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I will therefore tell you both the tough and the tender of the little bird that lives there. When you hear the hard part

Book Title: Trophy Hunting

The right things.

If, moreover, you happen to enjoy pointing dogs, this is the time to watch them do their best work -- or worst. You can help by carrying water and boots for yours. If it has long hair, shave it. If the dog limps, check between its toes for sand-burrs. And if you have never used a beeper-collar, this might be the place to try one. It's hard on a young dog to point twenty minutes while you wander around looking for it.

A Montana friend of mine is a real hunter, tough of leg,

sound of wind, and healthy of attitude. He's been known to shoot a back-country elk and pack it out in one day. He's also been known to hunt for five days without seeing a Mearns' quail. That was during one of the recent dry seasons. His pup was too green to help. By way of contrast, Ed Epsen's Ginger, an experienced German shorthaired pointer, found six coveys on heavily hunted public land nearby. She did it in one morning. She held while we flushed them, then kept on pointing while we kicked out any stragglers.

If you don't enjoy suffering, try hunting the desert instead. The Mearns' is not a desert quail.

To fill out the pattern for occasional longer shots, it helps to use a full ounce of shot in sizes 8 or $7\frac{1}{2}$. Low-recoil standard-velocity loads work fine.

Javelina rootings are deeper and more extensive, without the neat little holes. (Don't get the pup interested in javelinas. They are even worse for his health than the catclaw acacias.)

There is another exciting way to find the birds. You ride a horse into the canyons. You pass patches of light and shade, swish through the grass, skirt red-and-gray-and-green manzanitas, and slip into somnolence, at which time your mount steps into a covey and all participants become airborne. By the time you have dusted yourself off, your transportation has turned into the

thunder of distant hooves. This is why another of the Mearns' aliases is "walk-home bird." Well, I made that one up, but it is true that horsemen appreciate this quail less than hunters.

It is also true that, for a small bird in a small corner of the United States, this one has more names than it needs.

Under such conditions, you might take a limit of fifteen birds if your conscience would let you do it. I hope it won't.

On the other hand, the scarcity of birds has kept the crowds down. It seemed like a fair trade.

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The Mearns' is not a desert quail.

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HOW TO TRAIL A QUAIL

Plus how to shoot at
desert quail -- and
maybe even hit one
occasionally.

What I like best about desert quail is the way they bring out my natural athletic grace. Take that covey down south of New Mexico's Bosque Game Refuge. I'd been following its tracks for a quarter of a mile down a brushy arroyo, and the little three-toed prints began to get so thick that something had to happen soon. It did.

My first glimpse of the game responsible for the tracks came through a thin mesquite bush. A brightly

retype

- 2 -

2,
colored bird tilted its long crest and peered back at me with what I took to be defiance. I was new at this business, but there was no mistaking a male Gambel's Quail. A couple of others ran to join it. I'd heard that the thing to do under these circumstances was "blast 'em sitting," but I figured the birds were just about too handsome to shoot at all, let alone on the ground. (You are meant to conclude that, in addition to my hunting prowess, I am one of nature's noblemen.)

Instead, I leapt gazelle-like through that bush, only slightly deterred by the thorns, every reflex ready to make a snappy double on the covey rise. Small flying objects filled the air: mesquite beans, cholla-cactus skeletons, and tumbleweeds, all propelled by my collision with desert vegetation. Quail? Fifty yards away and running. I followed.

By the time I was making noises like a steam engine, I had narrowed the gap to only forty yards, and several birds flushed. I was in a high dither -- or maybe it was a low mesquite thicket. Anyhow, I could just see some grey rockets disappearing over the top. One of

them shed a feather on my second shot. Then, with my gun empty, thirty birds got up in good range. You can't tell me it wasn't planned.

With a cripple to worry about, I couldn't mark down the singles. Fortunately, my bird had a broken leg, but he still led me through a rousing game of ring-around-the-yucca. Eventually I gave up and shot him in the head at about twenty feet. As I was thus ignominiously engaged, Pete Pride came up. Now, Pete would rather shoot his own toe than a healthy bird on the ground, and I felt it necessary to give a thorough explanation. Sportsmen everywhere in North America will recall that the name of Pete (R.F.) Pride was stamped on many record-holding rifle barrels a few years ago, and he does everything the way he used to cut grooves and lands. I couldn't have found a better man to show me the desert. I'm a State Department Foreign Service Officer getting a year of special training at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Pete has lived here a lot longer. I hate to think what will happen to the quail, dove, turkey, and trout populations when he retires and has time to get out on weekdays.

2.
✓ The term "desert quail," in this nontechnical sense, includes two species: Gambel's and Scaled. You can feel free to throw in some others if you have a chance to hunt in old Mexico. Neither the public nor the literature of hunting has taken much note of these birds despite their wide range and great populations -- several times greater than human numbers in the Southwest, I suspect. Disagreement starts with their names: some writers call them all partridges, some classify only the Gambel's as a "desert quail," and some refer to Scaled Quail as "Blues" or "Cotton-tops." This latter nickname is especially appropriate, for the most conspicuous feature of a Scaled Quail running away from you is the white tip of his short crest. Or perhaps it's her short crest. The sexes look alike to anyone but another Scaled Quail. Evidently they have no trouble telling the difference, because every fall there are vast coveys of new birds. Some of these must represent more than one family, for I refuse to believe that one pair can raise thirty chicks, but any way you look at it the desert quail are great reproducers.

Despite the white-tipped crown and black-rimmed ("scaled") feathers, the Scaled Quail is an inconspicuous, grey bird. The Gambel's, however, is wildly handsome.

The male in particular is so colorful that I fail to see how he can hide in a patch of cover the size of my footprint -- but he can, he can. His most striking feature is the long, expressive plume on top of his head.

Both of the desert quail get much of the water they need from vegetation, opening up vast tracts of dry land for their range. The scaled quail is supposed to need more green vegetation or free water than the Gambel's, but Pete and I have often found both species in adjoining dry arroyos. Both are a little bigger than the average Bobwhite. Scaled and Gambel's are equally fast on the wing, but I fancy that the Gambel's flushes a little more readily, is a little more clever, and gives slightly more sporty shooting. Perhaps I'm just swayed by those good looks.

The sporting qualities of these birds have aroused more controversy than their names. Some authorities are lukewarm, but I wonder whether these fellows may have done some ground-shooting on the innocent, protected coveys of big ranches. Where Pete and I have chased desert quail on public land, we have found about the most challenging upland shooting there is -- second only, per-

haps, to the Ruffed Grouse which we both used to hunt in New England.

In the first place, desert quail commonly get up low and far, far out. In the second, third, and fourth places, they are terribly fast. I used to wonder whether this speed might not be an illusion, but now I'm sure it's not. One morning I tried to go duck hunting in what the Weather Bureau called a forty-knot wind. The mallards wouldn't buck it, and the diving ducks had to tack. That afternoon Pete and I tried for quail. We found the little fellows getting away fast even when they had to fly directly into the wind. I don't mean that the little fellows can outfly mallards: the quail had sense enough to stick within inches of the brush, which may have cut the gale to twenty miles per hour or so. Even so, they showed an amazing flight performance. I've also seen the occasional desert quail come by high and making knots like a dove. Now I don't feel so bad when I miss with my first barrel and find the birds out of range for the second. Of course, not all shots are difficult, but for consistent trickiness and variation, an experienced covey of desert quail is the equal of any flock of jacksnipe.

The question of where to find the desert birds is

2. easily answered on a broad scale. One species or another is locally abundant from western Oklahoma to California, from northern New Mexico to deep in old Mexico. Pete and I never found it necessary to leave the southern two-thirds of New Mexico. We were allowed twenty birds a day in 1967 -- surely one of the most generous limits in the country -- and we found the country a vastly pleasant place to pass our time. In case anyone still pictures deserts in terms of bleached bones and sand dunes, let me add that the high southwest is the greatest place in the country for dry weather, scenery, and the other good things of winter. Food and motels are inexpensive, there are uncrowded campgrounds for those who don't mind cool nights, and the people really are friendlier. The Game and Fish Department in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, or Las Cruces will tell you the season's best hunting areas for the price of a ten-cent call or a letter. Then this article is supposed to tell you how to trace the birds down to the last loaded patch of brush.

2. At first, it's a bewildering proposition for an easterner used to thinking of "coverts." The whole desert looks the same to him, and there is a lot of it.

When possible, you narrow your search down to the arroyos, or dry gullies -- preferably those with some mesquite or other cover. There are birds on the sparsely vegetated flats too, and sometimes you have to hunt them, but they are less concentrated. They also have the disconcerting habit of peeling off in twos and threes during that first wild foot race. You start out chasing thirty and wind up flushing three -- maybe.

Having found a promising arroyo, you duck out of your car for a quick check of the first fifty yards. If you have a dog, better not turn him loose here; he can't help yet. First you want to find tracks -- lots of them and the right kind. You'll be astounded at the number and variety of tracks in this apparently sandy waste: tracks of pygmy rabbits, larger game, and vast numbers of birds. Some of the bird tracks will be of roadrunners: large asymmetrical imprints with two toes in front and two behind, something like a K. You don't want those. The quail prints have three [^]pominent toes in front and, depending on how the birds were walking, sometimes a fourth behind. When the birds have seen you and are running away, the nails on their front toes will drag a little, elongating the print. Then you should start moving fast. A quail trail, friend, is a great long string of these

tracks with a sprinting cottontop at one end and a wheezing hunter at the other.

If you're new to the desert, you'll be amazed at the clarity with which the sand takes and holds the prints of a light bird. As a matter of fact, birds much smaller than quail make good three-toed prints too, but the size should help you differentiate. Check the picture with this story for the correct scale in comparison to a 12-gauge shotgun shell. There is also the fact that juncos and such tend to cluster their tracks near bushes, while quail wander around everywhere.

If you see a cattle-watering tank, be sure to check it for tracks too, even though the quail cannot get at the water. Desert quail, for some reason, get along with cattle a lot better than eastern upland birds.

There is a final type of cover that makes for some of the most sporty shooting of all. That's the heavy, high brush -- often brown saltcedars -- along the course of such streams as the Rio Grande. Pete and I found only Gambel's Quail in this cover, even though Scaled Quail outnumber them in most of the rest of New Mexico. We didn't figure on getting a limit in this shooting, but it surely took us back to the good old days after Ruffed Grouse. And the quail were a lot more numerous. Where

we found one, we could count on putting up another dozen, often as singles or in small groups. The main difference was that the quail preferred to fly over, out, or around the brush instead of right through it like grouse.

When you have found the birds, there are a few tricks to hunting them most effectively. It helps to remember that they prefer to run uphill and fly down the other side -- separated from the hunter by tons of sand and gravel. If you can spot them from a distance, getting above them and herding them down into a draw, they may hold for a second and then flush up the opposite slope. That improves your chances, for uphill flight keeps them to slightly subsonic velocities.

✓ The trouble with this strategem is that birds don't usually herd worth a darn. Reminds me of a comment from a cowhand who had been trying to drive elk into a trap in Yellowstone Park. "They drive just fine," he noted, "as long as you drive 'em exactly where they were planning on going." In the case of quail, right up the arroyo is usually where they are planning on going, and you'll be busy just keeping up without flanking maneuvers.

Sharp-eyed hunters expect to spot a few quail on the ground before they flush a covey. If the birds are

anywhere close to shooting range -- and they usually are when first seen -- the best tactic can be summed up as: Charge! Maybe they will get flustered enough to split up and land as singles, and that's the real gravy in desert hunting. Singles lie closer than the covey, often very close. They are hard to see before they flush, but they nevertheless allow a much higher score. Despite my bumbling performance on the covey at the beginning of this story, I managed to scare the birds more thoroughly than myself, and Pete and I eventually bagged nine.

But I often manage to fumble this part of it too. For a while, out of misguided courtesy, I was waiting for Pete to get in position before the charge at the light brigade. The only thing I can do better than Pete is run. I can even run faster than a cottontop -- about $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1 mile per hour faster. It's not enough to give me a good, poised shot at the first rise, but it's enough to get them all shook up, maybe resulting in singles shooting for everybody. Once when Pete and I pushed a covey up a draw at a leisurely pace, they kept ahead of us for half a mile and then flushed wild, staying bunched. We didn't get a bird.

If a light snow falls, the next day is a good one to get out: only new tracks show. I've heard that desert quail hate rain and stick too tight to be hunted in it, but I can't speak from experience: never saw rain here in season. One thing I'm sure of is that a stiff wind makes them hard to flush and very nearly shotproff when they do get up. They are plenty hard to hit without a gale to aggravate their capers.

You don't see many dogs on the desert. For one thing, it is practical to hunt quail without them. Some fellows won't believe that dogs can handle these runners. Many southwesterners hunt quail only casually when big-game season is closed. Others claim that the desert thorns tear a dog up too much.

That's all baloney. A good dog should put many more birds in your bag if only by finding cripples -- and there are all too many of them in this hunting, for desert quail carry lead like a duck. A dog is also invaluable in finding singles and giving you a little warning of their flush: an important consideration for birds that get out of range as fast as these. A really good dog should even be of use in finding and busting up the coveys. As for that business about thorns; why, the east coast has them worse. Perhaps the prickles are

more spectacular in the desert, but they are also easy to walk around. My boots used to be scratched deeply all over after a season in Maryland, but in New Mexico they would last five years.

I should blush to give any advice on how to hit quail. Better I should listen to some myself. Still, here are my theories, which I occasionally manage to put into practice. Pete agrees with most of them, and that means something.

Desert quail in big coveys occasionally flush one after the other instead of as a bunch, like Bobwhite. Under such conditions, a gun with three, four, or five shots would be effective, no question about it. More frequently, the awkward balance and inflexible choke of repeaters would be a handicap. I like semiautos for ducks and doves, but for quail I want a gun that I can carry all day, get into action in a big hurry, and take a bird either close in or far out. This means about 1 1/8 ounces of shot in two barrels: one moderately open and one fairly tight. Pete can handle this recipe in a 20-gauge magnum weighing little more than six pounds. I couldn't take the recoil. My gun is a Belgian double weighing just over 7 pounds in twelve gauge. The first

barrel is choked 50% (quarter choke or tight improved cylinder) with a $2 \frac{3}{4}$ / $1 \frac{1}{8}$ / 8 load. I try not to use it at much more than 35 yards: our post-mortems show that neither penetration nor pattern density hold up much further. The second barrel is bored 65% (improved modified) with a 3 / $1 \frac{1}{8}$ / $7\frac{1}{2}$ load. Both Pete and I use side-by-sides, as it happens.

When singles get up close in the brush, snap-shooting is often the only system, but a little lead is necessary even here. There is rarely a real straightaway shot. The birds are often dropping, requiring a hold well under them. Longer shots force a fellow to swing through fast or use a big sustained lead.

There is one important final angle about desert quail, and I've never seen it mentioned in any book on hunting or cooking. These birds are all but unpluckable by any normal method. That's a real blow to my taste buds, but there it is: they have skin like a Bobwhite and feathers like a duck. Pete says each quill is hammered in and clinched on the other side.

✓ Late in late year's season, though, I did stumble on a way to get feathers out of at least Scaled Quail. (There were no more Gambel's to try it on.) I shot half a dozen, drew them without plucking in the field, then put them in

the refrigerator to age five or six days till the big dinner. To my pleasant surprise, the birds could then be plucked, with patience, and they never tasted so good.

Plucked birds could be roasted or cooked in any other normal way, always bearing in mind that their excellent basic taste is not protected by much fat. Skinned birds have no fat at all and must be so prepared as to put moisture back in the meat. Here's a recipe that will not force guests to stop off at a hamburger stand on the way home: brown a couple of cloves of shallots, finely chopped, in butter melted in a big casserole (or dutch oven). Add mushrooms at the same time or slightly later, depending on whether they are fresh or canned. In two or three minutes add half a dozen whole desert quail. Brown on all sides, then add salt, coarse-ground pepper, and nutmeg or other spice you may favor. Add an inch or so of a broth made of a cup of white wine plus chicken bouillon or vegetable water. Simmer until tender, add a cup of commercial sour cream, heat briefly, and serve in the same casserole garnished with chopped parsley.

Then try to convince the crowd that you can hit quail as well as you can cook 'em.