
Let the Games Begin!

by: Margaret Stewart

THE OLIVES ARE RIPE!

Our older home came with two “grandfathered” olive trees. Nowadays everyone frowns at the mention of olive trees. They are, of course, non-natives, imported from the Mediterranean.¹ Worse, their springtime burst of pollen causes many folks serious allergic reactions and in some communities planting them is forbidden. Late in the year the ground beneath the trees is covered with black fruit, which is smashed by feet and tracked onto the carpet. UGH.



courtesy Wikipedia

However, olives thrive in our climate, living for many years with a minimum of care. Their sage-colored leaves offer cool, dense shade, safe places for nests. The bountiful olives ripen in mid-December, and from that time on there is a contest among all the ground-feeders to see who can reap the harvest. Sometimes it grows violent.

In November the quail begin to haunt the gravel under the trees, preparing themselves for the feast even before the olives fall. By that time they have completely stripped the pyracantha berries, which ripen earlier, and are getting hungry for fresh fruit. Flocks of twenty or so stroll in each morning looking very serene and detached as they peck through the small stones in rehearsal for the anticipated event.

¹ Editor's note: *Olea europaea*





19th Century Illustration
courtesy Wikipedia

A bit of wind is required to knock the olives off, and only a few drop at a time. We resist the temptation to shake the fruit down, on the theory that Nature knows best how to dole out her gifts. With squirrels, Gila woodpeckers, thrashers and mockingbirds all competing for the same prize, everybody has to hustle. Quail are fast sprinters but too plump to risk a landing in the tree, and the olives grow at the ends of slender branches. So the spirited olive games must be waged on the ground.

The quail not only watch the olives, they watch each other. And with good reason.

When a lucky bird finds fruit, two or three buddies will rush in to snatch it away, like a tiny black football. It takes quick thinking to make the zigzag dash behind a distant rock where the morsel can be eaten in peace. More often, one aggressive quail will fight the others for it.

Pecking order is a deciding factor. A lowly quail, easily intimidated, will abandon his olive and scamper off in a panic rather than give battle when a rival dashes toward him.

Between olive drops the quail assume their aura of proper respectability, but should a single black fruit fall from the tree, there will be a flurry of feathers and wings as the whole covey swoops down on the treasure. The resulting scramble resembles a football scrimmage and the winner is pursued by frantic friends to the far corner of the yard before they give up and go back to wait for the next windfall.

The olive games are played every day, dawn to dusk, from December till March, when the last fruit has finally been eaten and the spring rains have brought new sources of food for the desert creatures. No sticky black mess will ever be found under our old olive trees. Nature will have kept the gravel clean, the quail fat and our family amused all winter long.

