
We Brake for Baby Quail!

by: Brenda Olive

MAY WE PROTECT THIS NEVER-ENDING SOURCE OF ENJOYMENT

Have you noticed the young additions to the bird population in your yard lately? In my estimation, the most popular newcomers are the young in Gambel's quail families often seen scampering across the road. I find myself holding my breath hoping that each quail makes it safely to the other side. If you see a family crossing the road, please hit the brakes – the young can't get out of the way as fast as the adults. Just a second or two can make a difference between life and death!

It is fun to watch them come to our watering hole led by protective parents. When they leave, one parent leads the way while the other waits to see that there are no stragglers. It is important now to see that fresh, clean water is available.



Wikipedia

The number of Gambel's quail that will hatch this time of year depends almost entirely on rainfall. But the rain must come at the right time. If adequate winter rain falls, the desert blooms with wildflowers, seeds and forbs.¹ Quail relish the green growth, such as bursage which contains vitamin A and triggers the bird's sexual response.

¹ Wikipedia : Forbs are herbaceous flowering plants that are not graminoids (grasses, sedges and rushes).



The green growth means quail pairing, nest construction and the laying of big clutches of eggs. It also means that there will be plenty of seeds when the young begin to forage.



Male
Wikipedia

Gambel's quail can commence breeding activities as early as February, and later in higher elevations. Nesting begins shortly afterwards and peaks by mid-June. Clawing and using sharp beaks, quail hollow out a bowl-shaped nest in the ground to hold 9 to 15 speckled, buff-colored eggs. Their incubation period is only 21 days, and baby quail hatch with the help of the mother quail as she pecks away at their shell. The father quail keeps the hatchlings together until all eggs are hatched.

They all leave the nest immediately, fully clothed and ready to go exploring and foraging for food and water.

A high protein diet is required and is satisfied by insects that develop in the growing spring vegetation. When the young reach maturity, various seeds from this same growth provide the larger proportion of the high energy food needed until the next winter crop of annual growth. However, did you know that 60 to 70 percent of the young hatched each summer disappear by winter through natural mortality?



Female
Wikipedia



The key to an abundant quail population (as for most wildlife) is an adequate food supply throughout the year. Man's disturbance of the desert has contributed to reducing and altering the amount of supportive natural habitat required. Wildlife in need of food does not reason or heed property boundaries. The greener oases of landscaped and watered yards are likely to attract wildlife to off-limits munching of domestic plants, cacti and trees.

Chicken scratch or wild bird seed can be made available in the same place at approximately the same time daily, preferably near protective vegetative cover, and not abruptly discontinued. I find myself bird watching for hours as they feed. I listen to the adult quail conversing with their young in their own special way.

Water needs to be kept fresh and free of contaminating algae and debris. The ideal water container is both shallow (such as a jar lid) and large in circumference. If the container is too deep, quail chicks and other small animals can drown. Don't be surprised if a toad hops into the water for a moisturizing renewal!

Our Gambel's quail are a never-ending source of enjoyment. May we always protect their habitats so that generations to come will continue to have this natural source of pleasure in the desert.

