

The Plumed Speedsters – Pacific Coast Range Mountain Quail



It happens with a crack of a stick while walking in on a distant point; a covey explodes both left and right into the thicker stands of young Douglas firs. I touch off a shot down a darkened corridor between the trees, unsure whether a quail drops. But the telltale feathers lingering in the still forest air give hope of a bird in hand and a bird for Parker to retrieve.

Something learned along the way of my own journey into mountain quail hunting addiction is that mountain quail can happen anytime. Any upland hunter venturing into mountain quail territory will frequently be surprised by wild covey flushes the first time they erupt from the side of some ridge in the Coast Range. Mountain quail won't hold well for a dog until the covey is broken up, and then the singles hold for stylish points. Take just only a few so the covey doesn't take a huge hit.

Some years ago I relocated from New England, serendipitously settling in Corvallis, Oregon, all within a 30-minute drive of wild quail hunting opportunities. Although the pheasants that once abounded even within our city limits have disappeared, the mountain quail are a constant. Sure, like other game birds, populations are cyclical, and a harsh winter or unusually wet spring can affect mountain quail numbers. However, mountain quail can be reliably found in habitat that — unlike the haunts of the ubiquitous California quail — is usually far from development.

My first experience with mountain quail began early one September. Oregon was still new to me, so I regularly set out on evening adventures to explore the area. Every time out in the woods ended in a new story. More and more, these exploits led me west toward the Pacific. There were so many roads leading off the main highway that beckoned for exploration. Where do these roads lead? Could there be a lonely wooded pond filled with wild cutthroat trout ... or a hidden grouse covert?

I turned off the highway onto a steep climb up a gravel logging road, not knowing what sporting adventures lay

Although dogs are not always necessary to find mountain quail, they do assure most, if not all, quail are retrieved from the thick brush. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)



in wait. Several miles into the drive, the view through the windshield filled with a massive open slope, dotted with waist-high trees and overgrown bramble clumps. While driving the Jeep, I crept along and scanned the slope for signs of wildlife. A quail like I've never seen before, with a regal straight plume on top of its head and distinct side stripes, scurried across the road. Another eight quail popped from the roadside ferns following the larger lead quail. Making a mental note of this location, I drove several more miles into the woods before encountering a ditch cut straight across the road, blocking any further road travel.

That was interesting.

I climbed across this trench and wandered several hundred yards before finding what turned out to be the remnants of a dead-end logging road through a forested piece of land. The road ended along a knife-edge ridge, just barely the width of the road. The slope dropped off into another forest, this one much thicker and darker than anything I had walked through that evening. At eye level, the sun was dropping fast toward the Pacific, which was almost in sight from this vantage.

Then I heard it — a high-pitched, prolonged whine, the bugle of a Coast Range Roosevelt elk beckoning from the forest below. The wildness of this cut has always attracted me. This area turned out to be a reliable place to find quail during my first years of mountain quail hunting.

Where the Wild Things Are

Something I've learned about the mountain quail is that I always find them in the same place every season — until I don't.

Mountain quail live in and around clear-cuts of a certain age. They first appear in areas cut five to eight years prior. Once quail inhabit these cuts, they'll remain before the trees have grown high and thick enough and have transformed into less desirable habitat. I've hunted the same private forest land for more than two decades and observed that quail migrate over time from a grown 15- to 20-year-old cut to the closest other desirable habitat — land with smaller trees and a thick carpet of grasses and brush.

Another constant is that birds are always near sources of water, especially early season birds. Before venturing out to locate more quail, I map out spots with water and natural drainages. Then it's "boots on the ground" as I scout these waterways as potential paths to mountain quail and, when possible, to search for game trails along creeks that lead to clear-cuts.

I started hunting my current favorite area when it was an eight-year-old clear-cut, found when an earlier hunting covert was overtaken with young trees that became too dense to walk through. This new area was pure soil and slash just a few years earlier. I now regularly spot quail in the area.

This section grew into something just about right: some alders growing along the edge and a recently discovered year-round brook providing a constant source of water under the thick alder canopy. It is such a huge expanse that it is home to at least three separate coveys. The east slope covey is always a favorite to watch and hunt. Because these quail reside in the transition between the clear-cut and a forest, encounters with these quail are frequent, but shots are few and far between as these quail fly past the edge into a seemingly impenetrable forest.

In this very area on one of those rare days, Parker went on



An experienced mountain quail dog, Parker, at 12 years old, searches the slopes for quail. (Photo/Glenn Zinkus)



Early season quail hunting can be dry, and dogs require regular water breaks. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)



This dust bath, a telltale sign of quail, unmistakably indicates quail are nearby. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)



Young mountain quail are typical of the coveys found in the September opener. (Photo/Glenn Zinkus)

point, but no wild flush ensued. I walked up to a small grassy flat, and a quail shot up — one quail that actually held for the point! I snapped off a shot ahead of the rocket-propelled bird and watched the downward trajectory as it fell at the edge of the forest. Parker went for the retrieve, and I stepped toward the downed bird.

This quail was in clear view on an old fallen tree. But Parker did not pick it up. Something was not right.

Parker shook his head, ears violently flapping against his chin then retreated, tail down, back toward me. I took more steps forward and soon saw something in the air: a swarm of bees. Stinging bees!

The quail was entangled in some branches on the tree, but bees continued emerging from underneath that tree, smack dab under the quail. I tended to Parker at the Jeep tailgate, getting some antihistamine into a small post-hunt snack to help him with the stings. One bee sting resembled a marshmallow stuck to his snout. I suffered through my own stings and put on a lightweight jacket to cover my arms. I ran back to retrieve the bird.

The next day I set off to find some new coveys. The first big discovery of the day was a prime clear-cut that became off limits. This cut was a productive and sentimental favorite covert I call Winston's Hill, named after a hard-charging Brittany from a previous generation of dogs. Winston's Hill is a steep mountaintop, about 3,000 feet, requiring a switchback climb up another dead-end logging road, culminating in a final push straight through a 20-year-old forest that opens up to a beautiful, brushy clear-cut. Last year, the land was posted *No Trespassing*, including a warning about video surveillance.

My first thoughts were, "Video surveillance? Out here? At least 10 miles from the nearest paved road?" Anyway, the new timber company owner of this tract did not welcome hunters. A new grouse and quail area was necessary. Never being opposed to exploring and finding new areas, I continued the drive down the mountainside.

Another spur-road exploration resulted in a hunting area that had it all: a big spread, a clear-cut and fledgling forest with copious grasses, thorn brush and ferns. Just the type of place to find quail in Oregon.

Sure enough, about a mile into the new area, it was obvious that quail were in the forest, not far from the cut. The stirring and low pitch *chut ... chut ... chut* of nervous mountain quail gave them away. This area appeared promising. Parker came around to my right, and in unison, we stepped into the woods.

Boom!

The covey flushed, stayed together and flew deeper into the trees. No shots fired, as the quail flew low, and the branches and trunks formed the perfect escape cover. I muttered, "Genius, these quails."

Continuing back to the overgrown road, we turned a 90-degree bend at what seemed to be a ridge top. I stood looking ahead for several seconds, processing what was there. The buff color snout of a bear came into focus as I put together what I was actually seeing. The bear got back onto all four



More often than not, quail are in the transition areas between young clear-cuts and older growth forests. (Photo/Tuen Zinkus)

paws, and all I saw then was bear butt as the bruin shot off in the opposite direction, straight down this jungle-like logging road. "Parker, come!" I yelled out, maybe with a bit of quiver in my voice despite barking out this stern command. Parker obeyed and sat right at my side. We turned around back to the quail encountered earlier, putting some distance between the bear and us.


The first porcupine encounter in my mountain quail experiences happened in the Coast Range. For years I'd heard the stories of nasty porcupine experiences and of dogs' heads covered in quills and seen the photos of quills stuck in their tongues that made me simultaneously wince and shrink in horror.

My first sight of a live porcupine was one munching on blackberries among the ruins of an old homestead buried in the foothills of the Coast Range. I saw it well enough in before the untethered dog reached it. I immediately called in my first Brit, Deschutes, leashed him and carefully walked past the porcupine, all the while keeping a tight leash and a ready shotgun, just in case. Later in life, after much more porcupine experience, I learned that these porcs are entirely docile. Just don't try to sniff or bite one.

Rewards of the Hunt

Mountain quail in Oregon ring out the summer and usher in the autumn. The season opener often feels like summer, but a climb during the late afternoon into the Coast Range usually brings one to perfectly "hunnable" temperatures. The early season, 8 p.m. sunsets are still late enough to feel like summer. Better yet, early September evenings are ideal for outdoor grilling. Nothing is better than trimming a quail, marinating the birds overnight in late summer berries, herbs and wine and having a barbecue on the back patio. Add an Oregon Pinot Noir, and there can be no better culinary experience in the world.

Quail are, of course, best tasting at the point of the gun. So fresh quail it is, the day after the hunt. Don the fleece jacket to fend off the September evening chill, sit back, swirl a glass of Pinot and reminisce about the previous evening's hunt.

Mountain quail also signal the end of the season. Western Oregon mountain quail season extends through the end of January. Late season birds become more scattered, and the higher elevation coveys move lower. It's always a challenge to get in and out of quail areas with the low sun and short winter days, but somehow, a single bird during the late season is a prize that tides over both hunter and dogs until the next season. 



Quail are best prepared when they are fresh. A chef once said that quail are best served at the "point of the gun." (Photo/Glenn Zinkus)