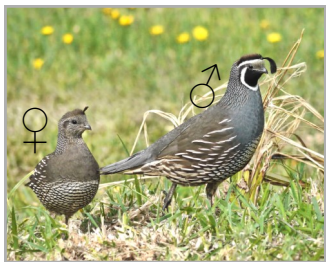


# QUAIL...A VALUABLE ADDITION TO ANY AVIARY

## # 7 THE CALIFORNIAN QUAIL

*Callipepla californica*



Feral pair in New Zealand  
Photo: Sid Mosdell

The Californian Quail, also known as the California Valley Quail or Valley Quail, is a small ground-dwelling bird in the New World quail family. It is the state bird of California.

This species has a curving crest, consisting of six feathers, that droops forward (this is black in males and brown in females). Males have a dark brown cap, a black face, brown back, grey-blue chest and a light brown belly. Females and immatures are predominantly grey-brown with a light-coloured belly. The flanks are brown with white streaks. The closest relative is Gambel's Quail which has a more southerly distribution and, a longer crest (2.5"/6.3cm), a brighter head and is scallier in appearance. The two species separated 1-2 million years ago, during the Late Pliocene or Early Pleistocene.



Gambel's Quail  
*Callipepla gambelii*  
Photo: Valerie Everett

The Californian Quail is a highly sociable bird that often gathers in small flocks known as "coveys". One of their daily communal activities is a dust bath, which they prefer to conduct in a sunny position. In the wild, the presence of the circular indentations 7-15cm (3-6") in diameter created by their dust bathing is a sure sign of the specie's presence.



Map: "Olga007"

This is a sedentary species, that coexists well at the edges of urban areas. But is declining in areas where human populations are increasing. The Californian Quail's original habitat is south-western United States, but they have been introduced to other areas including British Columbia, Hawaii, Chile, New Zealand, and Norfolk and King Islands in Australia. This species is a ground forager, and often scratches in the soil. The diet consists of seeds and leaves, but they also eat berries and insects. They can sometimes be seen feeding on roadsides.

If startled, Californian Quail flush into short rapid flight, but given a choice, they prefer to make their escape on foot.

Their preferred breeding habitat is shrubby areas and open woodlands. The nest is a shallow scrape under a shrub or other cover, lined with vegetation. Twelve to fourteen eggs are the average clutch. Once hatched, the young are cared for by both adults. Often, families group together, into

multifamily "communal broods" which include at least two females, multiple males, (which are not necessarily the genetic fathers), and many offspring. In good years, females will leave the young with her mate and breed again, often with a different male.

Californian Quail have a variety of vocalisations including the social call of "chicago", plus both contact and warning "pips." During the breeding season, males utter an argumentative "squill" call and often interrupt their mate's "chicago" call with a "squill," this is a possible form of antiphonal<sup>1</sup> calling.



Californian chick  
Photo: Tony Wills

<sup>1</sup>response or reply.

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## MY EXPERIENCES WITH THE CALIFORNIAN QUAIL

By Bert Field<sup>1</sup>

From the SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVICULTURAL MAGAZINE<sup>2</sup> Volume 3, N<sup>o</sup>. 7, July 1960

In June 1959 I had the good fortune to obtain four Californian Quail, three males and one hen. These, from all accounts, being scarce, I had procured them with the urge to increase their numbers. As time went on I disposed of two of the male birds (which I have since regretted) three being too many for one hen. The pair I retained were housed in an aviary 40 feet (12m) by 16 feet (4.9m) and 8 feet (2.4m) high, this being a planted flight aviary with a shelter at the western end. In the centre of the flight is a mandarin tree and this reaches the top of the flight. The birds kept in this aviary are several pairs of Diamond Sparrows, Emblemas, Orange-breasted Waxbills, yellow-rumps and a pair of Princess Alexandra Parrots. All these birds agree very well together and at no time do they squabble whilst feeding. Seed supplied to these birds is panicum, canary, white millet, hulled oats and a little niger. In regard to greenfeed I have not gone out of my way to feed this type of food; occasionally I give them a little silverbeet, added to which at times they feed on the green (*sic*) of seed that has sprouted after being scattered on the floor of the flight.

In the middle of December the hen showed signs of nesting and the initial procedure was a lengthy process. For days at varying periods I watched her carry out the task of preparing the site and working around it. Days on end, apart from eating and drinking, she worked around the area selected, picking up pieces of sticks and dry grass stalks and with a toss of the head threw this material over her back towards the nest site. This was done

<sup>1</sup>the late Bert Field was a well known aviculturist in South Australia's "River Land".

<sup>2</sup>the original name of BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA.

from a distance of up to 30 inches (65cm) from the nest site and eventually she appeared to be satisfied there was enough material near the site. However, I believe that partly this also included having a little game all (of) her own, because had she used all of the material handled and tossed over her back the nest would have been big enough for a Mallee Fowl, it seemed. Whilst nest building no assistance was received from the male.

On January 3rd the nest was completed and the final construction consisted of a heap of sticks and dried grass being only about nine inches (23cm) in length and four inches (10cm) wide and oval shaped, mainly because this was built between some brush and the wire of the aviary flight; this was hollowed out to a depth of two and a half inches (6.35cm). The nest was in full view at all times. The first egg was laid on January 4th and the remainder on alternate days until thirteen eggs were laid, and on January 30 the hen commenced incubating and unassisted carried on for the full period. On February 20 six chicks were hatched and these within an hour of being hatched left the nest. At this stage the male came to light and more or less took an active interest in rearing the chicks. The remaining 7 eggs were infertile.

On the day of hatching I had the misfortune to find one chick dead; this when found was back in the nest. It had been killed, and this had been accomplished in a ruthless manner, as the dead chick had been severely pecked around the head and back, apparently by a male Painted Quail\*. My reason for this assumption was due to the fact that since the death of this chick the Californian Quail have kept this bird well clear of the chicks, really becoming vicious, and attacking him should he venture closer than six feet (1.8m) to them. Whilst rearing the chicks no special food was provided and their diet consisted of the food supplied to the parent birds and mentioned earlier in the article. The chicks thrived on this, added to which they apparently managed to get a number of insects off the mandarin tree. They spent a considerable amount of time around this tree jumping in the air and picking at small insects and watching them was an enjoyable treat. I purposely omitted to supply extras as a test to see if the parents would successfully rear these birds with the facilities normally available as a routine diet. Having accomplished this I am now of the opinion that the Californian Quail will do quite well if left to breed under the conditions I have mentioned. Unfortunately I had the misfortune to lose another of the chicks through misadventure, this was caught up in some brush and being unable to free itself from this position succumbed. The remaining four are now almost as big as their parents, and to my delight are all hens.

\*Quail species should never be mixed, as all are extremely territorial and will fight. Ed.