



# Hunting Tips, Randall D. Babb

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## QUAIL

**Gambel Quail and Scaled Quail:** Use 12-28ga shotgun with improved cylinder to modified chokes and shooting shotshells with #7 ½ -6 sized shot.

Start your quail hunt early in the morning when it's cooler and birds are more vocal and active. Also consider using a quail call and listen for coveys to answer; this will save walking and time. Quail calls may be purchased at most sporting goods stores. While walking in the field, stop frequently to listen for birds. Gambel's and scaled quail make a variety of sounds; learn to recognize these calls. Once birds are found, attempt to split the covey up and work cover for single birds, this is where you're likely to get most of your birds. Estimate the number of birds on a covey rise and keep count of the number of single birds that are flushed while working for singles. This way you can make sure you've worked the covey thoroughly. If you have hunted through the area where the scattered birds settled and have only gotten up half the number of the birds that were counted on the covey rise, you know that there are still more birds in the area and can work the surrounding cover accordingly.

Gambel's and scaled quail like to run and if the cover is not heavy enough will literally out run hunters and dogs alike. Minimize your frustration while hunting these birds by choosing areas that have good ground cover in the way of grasses and shrubs. This vegetation provides hiding places for scattered birds. On birds that want to run ahead of you, put pressure on them by unloading your firearm and trotting after the birds until you have flushed the covey enough times for the birds to be sufficiently scattered to hold. Then work the area for singles. Avoid hunting areas with little ground cover; it will only lead to frustration. For desert quail to hold (not flush at a distance too far for the hunter to shoot at them) there must be adequate ground cover for the birds to hide in (e.g. grass, shrubs, etc.). In sparsely vegetated areas quail tend to run and flush at excessive distances. This can be a problem in years of poor production as the hunter is faced with pursuing older "educated" birds. There should be



plenty of young birds this season so running birds will likely not be a problem this season. Young birds hold better so it is worth the effort to find those areas that experienced better hatches.

Once the birds are scattered and holding a hunter will flush more birds if they walk in a zigzag fashion through the cover, occasionally pausing for a few seconds. Waiting can be as important as walking in areas where there is good cover and where you know there are birds. Scaled and Gambel's quail both can hold very tightly and this is where a dog can come in handy to locate these close holding birds. If you do not have a dog, kick or toss rocks into likely clumps of shrubs to flush birds. It is not uncommon to walk into an area, stop for a few seconds, and have a bird flush right behind you after you resume walking. Be ready for this. Attempt to read the cover and terrain to predict where birds may be hiding. Groups of closely growing shrubs, shallow draws lined with dense vegetation, or low thickets, should be investigated. If a hunter has a partner, develop a game plan and move through an area about 20 to 30 yards apart covering the area thoroughly. If birds are holding tightly it is not unusual to cover the same ground many times and still flush birds. Quail will often hold closely in inclement weather. Once a bird is knocked down, stay at the ready for a second or two to make sure the quail is not crippled and runs off. Also mark downed birds carefully and walk directly to the spot and retrieve the bird. If the downed bird is not found immediately take the time to carefully search the surrounding area within about a 15 yard, or more, radius. Gambel and Scaled quail are remarkably tough and can take a lot of punishment. Crippled birds will run down mammal burrows, into packrat nests, or hide in most any suitable cover. Resist the temptation to shoot at additional birds once a bird has been downed. This will translate to fewer lost birds and more game in the bag.

**Montezuma or Mearn's Quail:** Use a 12-410ga shotgun cylinder to modified chokes shooting shotshells with 7 ½ -9 sized shot.

Mearn's quail are a tropical species and rely on summer precipitation to for reproduction. Ideally rains should start in June or early July for good nesting conditions. These birds are known for their habit of holding very tightly, often flushing literally underfoot. Because of this habit, it is almost impossible to hunt them without a dog. Pointing dogs are preferred but close working flushing dogs also work well. Mearn's quail are not nearly as vocal as Gambel's or scaled quail and the only way to locate them is get out an walk. Began you hunts about 9 or 10am after birds have moved off the roost, usually located on the slope of a draw, and have laid down enough scent for the dogs to locate them. Work the bottoms and slopes of draws covered with abundant grass cover and a canopy of 30% or more love oak, pinion, juniper, or pine.

Once a covey is located be ready for some very challenging shooting. Shots are often within 15 yards or less so open chokes are an advantage. Coveys are typically smaller than our other quail; 6-8 birds. But in good years they can number more than 15. Flushed birds typically fly less than 50 yards and more typically 30 yards and often quickly place a tree of other obstacle between them and the shooter. Single birds are difficult to follow up so most of your shooting will be with the covey rise. Flushed birds are seldom where they land but rather 15-20 yards distant from the touch down point; typically up hill. When searching for singles work the area toughly letting your dog do the work. Be prepared for surprise flushes as the dogs have a difficult time locating recently flushed



Mearn's in dry conditions. Knocked down birds seldom run far but are extremely difficult to locate in the tall grass. Carefully mark downed birds and walk directly to them.

## **DOVES**

Use a 12-410ga shotgun with improved to modified chokes shooting shotshells with 9-7 ½ sized shot.

**SPEND TIME SCOUTING;** a few reconnaissance trips can pay off in great hunting. Check agricultural areas for cut grain fields or fields that may be cut in the near future and feed lots. Roosting sites composed of mesquite or tamarisk thickets, orchards, or groves of trees often make for good shooting and should be watched for. Weed crops, which are produced by summer rains, are also a favored food resource for doves. All of these spots can often provide excellent shooting. Doves tend to concentrate in areas for feeding such as feed lots, desert weed fields, vacant fields, and agricultural areas and thickets, orchards, or groves of trees for roosting. Doves establish flight patterns and follow them. For example, a grain field that has lots of doves feeding in it will have a few spots that will offer the best shooting. Watch tree lines, washes, canals, field corners, or other structural features that birds may follow. Late season doves frequently shift their flight patterns and feeding areas, so the more spots you have lined up the better your chances are for consistent good hunting. Desert water holes can often provide spectacular evening and late morning shooting during both seasons, and in the late season is a great way to combine dove and quail on a hunt. Avoid shooting near thickly vegetated areas such as alfalfa or cotton fields to minimize the number of lost birds. If you do hunt some place with thick vegetation try to choose your shots so birds fall into open areas. Mark downed birds and walk directly to them to minimize the chance of losing them. If the hunter stands still or sits or stands next to some sort of cover (a ditch, shrub, tree, telephone pole) birds will be less likely to shy away from them. Wearing drab clothing will also make the hunter less conspicuous. Be and sure to ask landowners before hunting on private land and to pick up all spent shells and shell boxes. Wait to clean your birds until you reach home. This way unsightly messes and trash will not left on landowner's property and help insure your privilege of hunting on private lands.

## **BAND-TAILED PIGEONS**

Use a 12-28ga shotgun with improved cylinder to modified chokes shooting shotshells with 7 ½ – 6 sized shot.

How late these birds stay around in the fall is largely dependent on how good the acorn crop is. If the crop is poor, birds leave earlier. Hunters will likely find bandtails concentrated in areas with acorns or other mast or fruit crops such as pinyon or elderberries. One way to hunt them is to sit on pine-country stock tanks. They usually come to water early in the morning (after feeding) so check stock tanks at higher elevations early. If they are using the tank, they will generally show up before 9 am. They may also be found in feeding in dense stands of gamble or other oak species. These birds like to loaf in pine snags and can occasionally be found in these trees at mid-day along ridge tops. They tend to travel along ridge lines, canyon edges, and often fly through saddles in mountain ranges. They are fast and powerful flies that can be difficult to bring to hand.

## **SNIPE**

Use a 12-20ga shotgun shooting shotshells with 8-9 sized shot.

Snipe are one of the most over looked game birds in the state. Snipe prefer marshy habitats along rivers, lakes, and flooded agriculture areas. Birds can often be spotted by the hunter prior to entering an area by glassing the water's edge with binoculars. Snipe flush similar to quail and usually make distinctive "scipe" call on take off. The zig-zag flight of these birds makes for a challenging target. Often the flushed bird will swing around presenting the hunter with a pass shot as it returns to the water. Check suitable areas often as snipe are prone to suddenly appear and disappear in feeding areas. Snipe offer a great plus for duck hunters. After a morning duck hunt, hunters should walk nearby marshy areas or other flooded vegetation. If you prefer to jump shoot ducks, snipe are common visitors to stock tanks. Snipe are classified as an upland game bird and steel shot is not required for hunting them.

## **DUCKS**

Use a 12-20ga shotgun with modified chokes shooting shotshells with 4-6 sized nontoxid shot.

It should be noted that regulations change from time to time and wise hunters will BE SURE TO CHECK CURRENT REGULATIONS FOR CHANGES FROM LAST YEAR AND SEASON DATES.

A common problem we experience in Arizona, despite nesting success, is warm winter weather. Often warm winters in the western states will "short-stop" much of the migrating waterfowl before they make it to the southern US. So while states north of us (Utah, Nevada, etc.) enjoy fantastic hunting, we experience sporadic shooting at best. In the same manner if warm weather keeps Arizona's high country waters open, many ducks and geese will spend the winter there rather than migrating to lower elevations. Simply put, many migrating waterfowl species go no farther south than they have to. If we have a warm winter, our state's high elevations will likely offer the best hunting.

The early part of the season offers the best opportunities for some of the early migrants like cinnamon and blue-wing teal. Mid to late November is usually when waterfowl hunting in the desert areas really picks up. At this time free water at northern latitudes typically becomes scarce forcing birds southward to seek feeding and resting areas.

Mornings after big winter storms and severe cold snaps are often an excellent time to check desert stock ponds for ducks. Decoys will prove useful on central Arizona lakes, rivers, and ponds. If you are decoying, you'll want to start early. Have your decoys set and your blind built before legal shooting time comes. Once again a little scouting will be a big help in finding a productive shooting spot. Ducks tend to congregate in backwaters, slow runs on rivers, and sheltered areas on lakes such as coves and the mouths of rivers and creeks. With some scouting you will discover that though there may be several likely spots that are used by ducks, there is one or a few spots that they prefer. Set out



your decoys and build your blind while it is still dark so you will be situated at legal shooting time. Typically the best shooting is in the first couple of hours of the day so it is important to be ready by legal shooting time because the ducks may only fly for a short period on any given day. On a typical duck hunt, shooting is usually over by 10 or 11 am. Geese generally fly a little later than ducks but you'll still want to be prepared by first light. Ducks will tend to move more in inclement weather so shooting often lasts longer on these days. Ducks have excellent eyesight and color vision, keep this in mind when hunting them, camouflage is recommended. It is also very important to remain motionless while birds are working the decoys or coming in. To retrieve downed birds from stock tanks try using a fishing rod rigged with a top water plug. Cast over dead birds and reel them in. The same rig fitted with a diving plug will retrieve decoys in deep water by snagging the anchor line. Remember only non-toxic or steel shot may be used for ducks and geese.

## **RABBITS**

Use 12-20ga shotguns with improved cylinder to modified chokes shooting shotshells with 7 ½ to 8 sized shot and 22cal rifles.

Cottontails offer an excellent supplement to the hunter's bag and some very tasty meals. Dove hunters should watch for rabbits along field edges while hunting. Walk thick cover such as tumbleweeds, before you finish your morning hunt. Quail hunters are likely to encounter cottontails most anytime but especially along desert washes and thickets. Try a special between seasons rabbit hunt using a 22. 22's offer an excellent challenge and good practice for upcoming big game hunts. Walk ridge tops in the early mornings and late afternoon, using binoculars to search for rabbits in the washes below. Dress bagged rabbits at the first opportunity and throw them on ice. Occasionally rabbits are the host to the large grub of the bot fly. These unpleasant looking grubs do not harm the meat of the rabbit and no rabbit should be discarded because of them. Jackrabbits are often overlooked and not only provide excellent sport but good eating. Teriyaki marinated and grilled jackrabbit back-strap is excellent fare...no kidding!

## **SQUIRRELS**

Use 12-28ga shotguns with full to improved cylinder chokes shooting 7 ½ – 6 sized shot and scoped 22cal rifles.

Arizona has more different species of tree squirrels than any other state. Abert's and Kiabab squirrels are inhabitants of ponderosa pine woodlands while Arizona gray squirrels utilize riparian corridors and red squirrels spruce/fir forests. The Apache or Chiricahua fox squirrel also uses riparian corridors and adjacent pine woodlands in the Chiricahua Mountains of the southeastern part of our state. Warm winters with little snow often set the stage for good squirrel hunting the following season. Start your hunt early in the morning when squirrels are most active. Quietly walk along logging roads and search for squirrels on the ground and in the trees. Once a squirrel is spotted it may be shot on the ground or rushed and run up the nearest tree. Chasing squirrels up trees at seven thousand feet elevation is more work than it sounds. Add an uphill incline and you have the makings of a cardiac arrest. A well-trained



dog that likes to chase squirrels makes the job easier. Abert's squirrels spend a lot of time on the ground foraging for fungi in the fall and are more likely to be seen there. Gray squirrels prefer riparian corridors of sycamore, walnut, and ash. The canyons under the Mogollon Rim are a good place to try for gray squirrels and you'll probably pick some Abert's there up too. Arizona gray squirrels are a bit harder to come by and can make for a challenging hunt. Red squirrels are found in spruce/fir habitat and most easily found by listening for their "wurring" call. Try using a 22 for squirrels instead of a shotgun, it's a lot more fun and you don't have to worry about shot at dinnertime. Bring a pair of binoculars to help you to spot squirrels in treetops. Consider a hunt for the Arizona big 5 (Abert's, Kaibab, Arizona gray, Apache fox, and red squirrels).