



Adult female Gambel's quail

Image courtesy of Mick Thompson



Covey of Gambel's quail

Image courtesy of IrinaK

Cover Image:

Adult male Gambel's quail
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HISTORIC SITE

GAMBEL'S QUAIL



At about 250,000 square miles, the Chihuahuan Desert covers a large portion of North America from Northern Mexico through the Southwestern United States. It is home to around 1,000 different species of animals. Each of these animals have specific characteristics that help them survive in the desert environment.

In this brochure, learn about the Gambel's quail, one species found in the Chihuahuan Desert.

Keep your eyes and ears open while out at Fort Selden Historic Site. You might just see and hear a quail or two out in the bushes or on top of the ruins.

Physical Characteristics

Gambel's quails are small, round birds with a large feather plume at the top of their head. Males are much more colorful. Their plumes are bigger than a female's and the top of their head below the plume is a bright red. Their head and neck is colored with black and white markings while the females are only a grey color.

Diet

Most of their diet comes from the plants around them. This can include native plants to the Chihuahuan Desert such as various cacti and the fruits they produce. They also receive the water they need from these plants helping them to survive in the desert. Gambel's quail also eat insects, though the chicks are more likely to eat insects than adults.

Habitat

Gambel's quail usually live in groups—called coveys. They create their coveys in areas with lots of bushes and thorny vegetation such as in brushy areas of the desert or in canyons. They usually look for these areas near water or in areas of the desert that get the most rainfall. Areas with a lot of grassy brush is necessary for them to hide in.

Senses

The Gambel's quail has many different types of vocalizations for different circumstances. Their most notable call is a loud three note “ka-KAA-ka” and is

used as an assembly call or to locate other quail in the area. “Kow” and “whit whit” calls are used by courting males to attract females. They also are known to use various clucking noises and grunts to communicate between individuals. An alarming “chip-chip-chip” is issued to the covey when danger is near.

Predators

Predators include rattlesnakes, raptors, bobcats, and coyotes. But quail are really good at hiding in bushes and staying really still so the predators can't see them.

Interesting Facts

- There can be up to 25 birds in a covey.
- Just before her eggs hatch, the female Gambel's quail calls to the chicks, who cheep to each other from inside the eggs. The eggs hatch in synchrony, with the chick cutting a neat hole in the largest part of the shell and leaving an intact piece of membrane to serve as a “hinge”—the chick pushes on the shell and opens the “door” that it has created.
- The plume on top of the quail's head is called a topknot.
- A few quail were introduced to Hawaii in 1928, 1958 and 1960, and a few remain there today on Kaho'olaw and on the big island on the slopes of Mauna Loa.
- Female Gambel's quail build the nest, which is a simple spot on the ground, usually covered by rocks and plants.

When the nesting site is chosen, she defines it with grass, sticks, and leaves. Then she lays 12 eggs at a brood. The eggs are incubated for 20-24 days. Young are able to move as soon as they are hatched out.

- This bird doesn't need a lot of water but will live near water if possible.
- Within a covey, mixed parenting is commonly practiced with pairs, rearing chicks of other pairs.
- Quail will often take “dust baths” where they will burrow into soft soil two to three inches deep, then wriggle around in the dirt while flapping their wings and ruffling their feathers. You can detect the presence of quail in an area by looking for the circular indentations left behind by their dust baths.
- Gambel's Quail are ground-feeding desert birds—so they are likely to visit yards that offer birdseed and water at ground level. They sometimes also come up to elevated platform feeders. You can attract them with sunflower seeds, cracked corn, millet, and milo.