

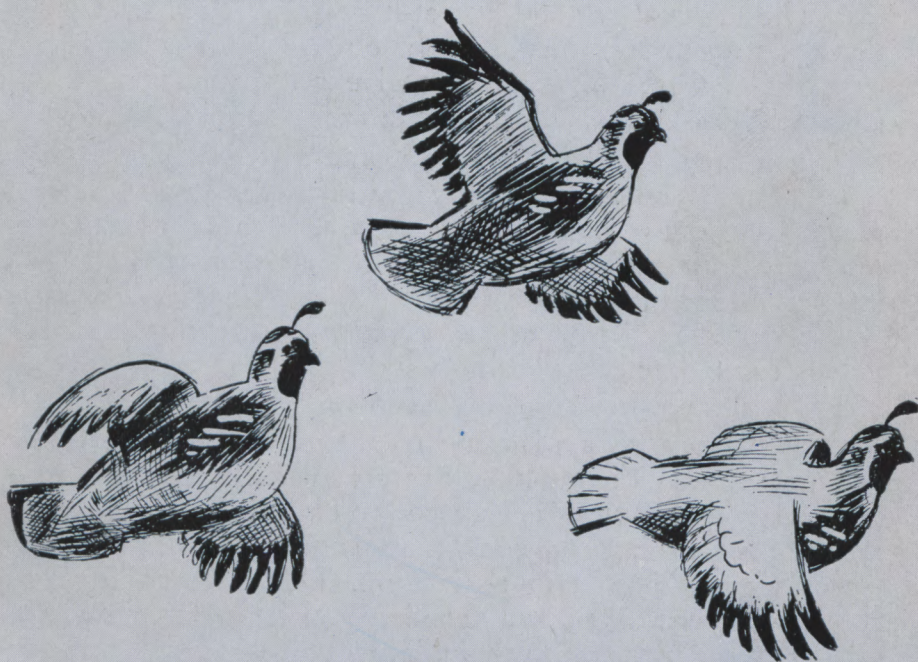
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Game Birds of COLORADO



COLORADO GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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Game Birds of COLORADO

By W. L. FLINN

Introduction

HAVE YOU ever watched a male pheasant, proud of his brilliant plumage, strutting confidently over his roadside domain? Or a sage grouse puff out his neck and spread his tail in his courtship dance on a spring morning? Or a mother quail suddenly scatter her brood when she feels danger is near?

The chances are good that at least one of these fascinating displays may be seen on the farms or sage lands around your own town. Game birds often thrive on the fringes of our largest cities—and sometimes within the cities themselves.

You may wonder why the Game and Fish Department has prepared this booklet on game birds for you. Our first reason, and the most important reason, is to help you enjoy the world around you — and you can enjoy it more as you learn more about the people and birds and plants and animals that compose it. Also, you may want to try your skill as a hunter some day; but whether you hunt or not, you will find pleasure in knowing how to recognize these colorful friends.

Our second reason is important, too. We in Colorado do not have so many game birds as we would like. Many factors combine to produce this shortage (you will learn some as you read the following pages), but there is only one real hope for increasing our supply in the future. This is by telling you about our game birds, and showing you how our use of the soil today is dangerous to them. Then you will know why we must use our land wisely to assure plenty of pheasants and turkeys and quail and grouse for all the years to come.

R. F. Gregg, Editor
Colorado Conservation

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Management

ALL WILDLIFE needs food to keep alive and healthy, and cover for protection against weather and natural enemies. Some wildlife creatures thrive under widely varying food and cover conditions; others are entirely dependent on one or a few plants.

The Game and Fish Department works to increase our game bird population by making more land suitable for them, and by releasing birds in areas which will sustain them. It also controls the number of game birds which may be taken by hunters. This job of maintaining adequate wildlife populations in balance with the land is called wildlife management.

Man probably has been the greatest enemy of our game birds, as well as wildlife management's biggest headache. Industry and agriculture have destroyed much food and cover and excessive hunting has brought some species near extinction. Excessive hunting is now controlled by laws which allow hunting during restricted periods only (open seasons), and limit the number that may be shot (bag limits).

Some attempts are being made to increase cover, especially for pheasants, by planting trees and shrubs on Colorado farm lands. Food for pheasants is usually plentiful on farms and does not present a problem. This kind of habitat improvement is costly and the plants require several years' care before their value is seen. Since most of our game bird range lies on private lands, we must work in close cooperation with landowners in these habitat-improvement programs.

Quail and pheasants have long been hatched and raised in large numbers at our state bird farm. These birds are released in what seems to be desirable habitat over the state where the birds are scarce. Hand-raised birds are tame and easy prey for their natural enemies. Perhaps if the food and cover were adequate in those places, the birds would be living there naturally.

Constant year-round observation of our upland game birds tells us of their population, nesting success, the condition of the habitat, etc. All these factors are considered before setting the seasons and bag limits on Colorado's game birds.



EBB WARREN

RING-NECKED PHEASANT

THE RING-NECKED PHEASANT is not native to America, but was introduced from Asia. Its present habitat is different from its original home, but it thrives on our farm insects and waste grains.

In early spring the brilliantly colored cock starts his mating activity. He establishes a "territory," maintains a "harem" and will fight to protect his hens and territory.

The pheasant is undoubtedly the most important upland game bird in Colorado. The male is a fairly large bird, distinguished by his long tail and white neck ring. His head is greenish-black, the breast is reddish-brown, and the rump is brown with a greenish cast. Most of the body feathers have a metallic sheen. The female generally has a brown back and is lighter below. She is smaller than the male.

Pheasants are ground dwelling birds and are capable of running very fast. Their size and strong flight, the delicious flavor of their meat and their ability to live under unfavorable conditions make them excellent game birds. We can best help these birds in Colorado by providing them with protective hedges and brushy areas.



DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

WILD TURKEY

THE WILD TURKEY looks a great deal like the domestic variety, except that it has a smaller head, larger eyes, and a more streamlined appearance. It has considerable white on the tail. It is an alert bird with a shrill, clear call in contrast to the gobble of its tame relative.

Wild turkeys once roamed most of the southern half of Colorado in the mountains and foothills. They served as a source of food for the Indians for many centuries. As civilization marched westward the turkey population began to dwindle because of floods, fire, destruction of food and cover, and uncontrolled hunting. In 1941 a trapping and transplanting program was begun in our state in which wild turkeys were trapped and released in suitable areas. The population now is large enough to allow a short hunting season each year.

The variety of wild turkey in Colorado is known as Merriam's Turkey. It likes the protection offered by scrub oak brush lands, and is fond of acorns, berries and insects. The turkey nests in May, and lays nine to 12 eggs in a ground nest, sheltered and lined with leaves and grass.



JOHN H. STANLEY

BAND-TAILED PIGEON

OF THE 17 kinds of wild pigeons and doves that visit this country, only the band-tailed pigeon and the mourning dove are seen here.

The band-tailed pigeon, like the mourning dove, comes to Colorado in the spring and departs in the fall. Pigeons and doves eat mainly seeds, grains and fruits, and drink by immersing the bill in water up to the nostrils—very rare in birds. All pigeons have one mate for life, and both sexes take part in building the frail nest of twigs. Young pigeons are first fed by a fluid from a pouch in the parent's neck called a crop.

The band-tailed pigeon is mostly slate blue on the back, dusky on the wings and tail with a darker band across the tail, which gives the bird its name. A white half collar crosses the neck. The bill and feet are mainly yellow. A metallic greenish-bronze sheen covers the back of the neck and shoulders of the adult.

One or two white eggs are laid, and the young are born naked except for a little down.



DENVER MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

MOURNING DOVE

THIS familiar bird is generally gray in color, with purplish bronze on the shoulders, back and tail. Darker slate gray is seen on the rump and outer wing feathers. Rather large, irregular black spots are found on parts of the wings. The tail is long and tapered. The outer tail feathers are marked with black bars and one nearly white bar at the tips. Under parts are paler and sometimes appear a buffy color. The bill is black and the feet are red.

Nests may be built on the ground, in a cliff, or in trees or shrubs. They are fashioned of sticks and weeds. Usually two eggs are laid, and two or three broods are raised each season.

Doves are considered excellent game birds. Their flight is swift and irregular, making them difficult targets.

Mourning doves can be easily identified by their mournful call, from which the name is derived, and by the sharp whistle of their wings in flight. They are among the earliest arrivals in spring and nesting activity begins soon after their appearance in Colorado.

The Quail Family

THE QUAILS are a family of ground-dwelling birds that now inhabit most of the United States. This popular group of birds was originally represented only by the scaled quail and bobwhite in the northern great plains and in the Rocky Mountains. Quail seem to be adapted to agriculture and civilization. Being ground-feeding birds, they find an abundance of food and sheltering cover in agricultural regions, especially around neglected farms. The bobwhite seems to have increased in Colorado when farming became widespread in the state.

All the quails are handsome birds. The most brightly colored are found in the Southwest and on the Pacific coast. They are welcomed and protected because of their cheerful disposition and beauty. They destroy many harmful insects and injurious weed seeds, and do very little damage to crops and property. For this service it is only fair that these birds be treated as welcome guests.

The quails are well adapted to the land on which they live. Their protective colors, though sometimes bright, often make them nearly invisible against their natural surroundings. They live together in groups called coveys. Quail escape their enemies by scattering in all directions on strong wings and long, sturdy legs. When scattered they reassemble by calling each other in piping voices.

Nests are usually made on the ground in the shelter of clumps of grass or weeds, or under bushes, and are lined with a little grass or leaves. Six to 15 cream-colored, speckled eggs are laid which hatch after about three weeks' incubation. The tiny chicks are covered with down and are able to run very fast a few hours after they have hatched. Quail usually roost on the lower branches of trees and shrubs.

Most of Colorado's quail like the dry, arid regions. But they must have a little water daily, and lack of water may be one reason for the absence of quail in some parts of the state.

Quail are excellent sporting birds, being swift in flight and good runners; in addition the meat has a pleasing taste.



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SCALED QUAIL

THE SCALED QUAIL is mostly bluish-gray tinted with dull brown, and has a buff breast and abdomen. The feathers on top of the head are tipped with pure white and stand up to form a bushy crest. That is why it is so often called "cotton top." Most of the under parts and the neck have a fish-like scaled appearance. The sides are brownish-gray, barred with white.

This trim and delicately marked bird inhabits a large section of the arid southwestern United States. In Colorado it makes its home in the plains and foothills in the southeastern part of the state, favoring rocky washes and gullies. It is the most widely distributed of the quails in Colorado, and like other members of the family, is a very swift runner.

Scaled quail are not naturally afraid, but show interest and curiosity toward many of their enemies. Perhaps for that reason they are not as plentiful as they once were. They depend upon their color for protection, and rarely fly unless they are hard pressed. Because of their natural camouflage, they are often heard but not seen. The call sounds like "pe-cos, pe-cos." (See the back cover for a full-color painting of the scaled quail.)



JOHN H. STANLEY

BOBWHITE QUAIL

THE BOBWHITE has a wide distribution over the eastern half of the United States. It has thrived and expanded with agriculture through the midwest. He has named himself with his heartening, two-syllable call.

Many of the characteristics of the other quail are shared by the bobwhite. In appearance he is not as brightly colored as others we know. He wears a mottled chestnut and gray plumage, with lighter shades on breast and belly. He has the familiar white line over the eye and down the neck, and has a white bib.

Bobwhite quail are found in small coveys, and prefer fairly open cultivated or pasture land with patches of brush for shelter. They are normally affectionate, although the males sometimes fight fiercely during mating time. Males are always attentive and good providers for their mates, and assist in the feeding and protection of the young. The covey sleeps in a group with heads out, ready to scatter if frightened.

Heavy snows sometimes take a heavy toll of bobwhites by covering them while sleeping and covering their food. Floods are destructive to these birds and their nests in eastern Colorado river bottoms.



KARL H. MASLOWSKI, NAT'L AUDUBON SOCIETY

GAMBEL'S QUAIL

GAMBEL'S QUAIL may be found over a large portion of southwestern United States. They can be identified by their call that sounds something like "cha-cha." This attractively marked bird has a general bluish-gray color. On the male, one white line outlines the top of his head, and a second outlines a dark bib on his neck. The crown is a rich reddish brown with a black plume that generally bends forward over the head. The flanks are the same color with white streaks. The belly is buffy white with a pure black patch in the center.

This quail lives in the dry and rocky regions of southwestern Colorado. Like others of this group the families band together in flocks during winter months. They scatter to feed and return at night to a dense thicket where they huddle together in a feathery mass for protection against the wind and cold. In the spring they mate and pair off to raise their young. Often a bird acts like a sentinel, guarding over the covey that may be feeding or nesting.

Gambel's quail are elegant and graceful, and always seem to be in motion. They have a pleasing language when feeding and scurrying about.

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JOHN H. STANLEY

CHUKAR PARTRIDGE

THE CHUKAR PARTRIDGE is not a native of Colorado, but originally inhabited parts of southern Europe and Asia. These birds are mostly a plain slate gray in color with a black line through the eye and down the neck, outlining a bib of buffy white. The under parts are lighter in color and the flanks are cream colored, barred with black stripes. The bill and legs are red.

Colorado has a number of places where chukars may be found. They like barren, rocky semi-arid regions, and now are most abundant in several western Colorado localities.

Chukars get their name from their clear, low-pitched call. Like others in the quail family, they do a lot of "talking" among themselves. In early spring these beautiful birds start mating, and establish nests on rocky hillsides.

Unlike our native birds, they prefer remote, unsettled areas to farms and civilization. Their diet contains grass seeds, weed seeds, insects, green sprouts and flowers. Trapping these birds and releasing them in suitable areas has increased their numbers in Colorado.

The Grouse Family

THIS FAMILY is characterized by having feathers on the legs and the base of the bill. As a group the grouse are larger than the quails. The most common colors in their plumage are brown, red and gray. As with most birds, the males are more brightly colored, and some show seasonal variations in color. Grouse spend most of their time on the ground where they feed and make their crude, roughly fashioned nests. They may lay from eight to 15 eggs.

The males, called cocks, perform elaborate dance and strutting exhibitions during courtship. An odd drumming is sometimes produced by expelling air from air sacs in the neck. The cocks often engage in savage fights for possession of mates, though little blood is shed in these encounters.

Grouse live on a variety of seeds, leaves, berries and insects, and some species will eat only a few foods. This habit tends to limit the range of the grouse. They depend upon their protective colors for hiding, and often crouch unnoticed until nearly stepped on. They take to flight with a startling flurry. Grouse are sometimes curious and trustful birds.

The grouse family includes about 25 separate species distributed over the northern part of North America. Five different kinds of grouse are found in some numbers in Colorado—the white-tailed ptarmigan, sage grouse and dusky grouse in the mountains and mountain parks; and the prairie chicken and the sharp-tailed grouse on the eastern and western plains.

Although not in the same class with the quails as sport, grouse were enthusiastically hunted in Colorado in past years. Eventually, however, dwindling populations forced closed seasons. A one-day open season was held in 1945, and there have been none since, although there is a possibility of short open seasons in years to come.

Generally speaking, the grouse family is declining in Colorado. This is partly due to the loss of food and shelter through the spread of civilization. Also, the natural lack of fear makes these birds easy prey for man and other enemies. Laws are all that stand between the grouse and complete destruction.



C. E. HAGIE

PRAIRIE CHICKEN

THE PRAIRIE CHICKEN is a grouse of the great plains, reaching into eastern Colorado. These birds once lived in great numbers, but have since retreated before civilization and have suffered from loss of food and cover. The birds are now protected by law.

Plumage of the prairie chicken is yellow-brown on the back and dull white below, barred everywhere with black. A tuft of stiff dark brown feathers lies along each side of the neck, and the head bears a slight crest. The males have air sacs in the side of the neck.

Like others of the family the "prairie hens" gather and engage in remarkable performances. On frosty spring mornings at daybreak the resonant "boom-a-boom" of the cocks wooing their mates can be heard. The males spread and raise their tails and lower their wings. The neck tufts are raised like horns exposing the orange colored air sacs. A stiff, jerky dance is performed. The males may then engage in violent but harmless fighting. The booming may be heard for a mile or more.

Prairie chickens eat many insects, fruits, leaves, flowers, seeds and grain.



GEORGE ANDREWS

SAGE HEN

THE SAGE GROUSE, or sage hen, is the largest of all American game birds except the turkey, weighing up to nine pounds. In Colorado it inhabits the drier sagebrush plains of the north and west.

The color of this bird is gray-brown, mottled with black and white above. The head is darker in color. Most of the lower parts are yellow-white. A yellow stripe on each side of the neck identifies the air sacs of the male. The female is smaller than the male and the plumage is similar.

Mating season begins early, and the strutting habits are remarkable. The males strut around with their enormous, irregular air sacs inflated so that the whole head and neck are balloon-like in appearance. The tails are erect and spread out like a strutting turkey. Expelling the air from the air sacs produces chucking and rumbling sounds. The males also engage in some fighting during the mating season.

These grouse are confined to the sagebrush areas, since their winter food is almost entirely sagebrush, leaves and shoots. The destruction of sagebrush lands has seriously reduced their numbers.



EBB WARREN

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

THE SHARP-TAILED grouse frequents the eastern and western plains of Colorado. It can be distinguished from the prairie chicken by its very pointed tail, the absence of neck tufts, and the fact that the sharp-tail's breast markings are irregular "V's" while the prairie chicken's markings are rows of bars.

With the first promise of spring, the sharp-tail's mating antics begin. Gathered on their booming grounds in early morning they appear to be standing quietly until one suddenly begins the dance. Spreading his wings and lowering his head, the sharp-tail races around the booming ground stamping his feet so fast and hard it produces a drumming sound. Immediately all the others join in, each one trying to make as much noise and show as possible to impress the females. Because of the regular motions of their performance, the grouse look like animated mechanical toys. After the nesting season, they gather in flocks to spend the winter and when startled and about to fly, utter a sharp cackling sound which is repeated in flight.

Because the sharp-tail lives in the same areas as the prairie chicken, its food is much the same—insects, leaves, buds, weed seeds and grains.



C. E. HAGIE

DUSKY GROUSE

THE DUSKY GROUSE lives in the evergreen forests of the Rocky Mountains. It is sometimes known as the pine grouse or blue grouse. This grouse is slate gray, mottled with black and brown. The tail is brownish with a broad gray band and has a black tip. The under parts are lighter gray marked with white. A distinct white line runs back of the eye.

This is a fairly large bird—next in size to the sage hen. No hunting has been allowed in Colorado on dusky grouse in recent years, because it has not been plentiful. Dusky grouse are also known as “fool hen” on account of their tameness and somewhat foolish curiosity.

Mating season comes in early spring, and begins with startling demonstrations by the male. He puffs the air sacs, on the sides of his neck, spreads his feathers, and struts about the female. The comb-like fiery wattles above the eyes lengthen as he bows low and forces the air out of his air sacs with a deep “boom, boom, boom.” The eggs are laid in a crude nest under a bush or next to a log. The young are grown by autumn.

Food consists of worms, insects, berries, plant leaves and fir needles.



PAUL GILBERT

WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN

PTARMIGAN live on top of the world, above timber line. The white-tailed ptarmigan is found in the Rocky Mountains from Canada to northern New Mexico, and in Colorado it is fairly abundant at high elevation. It is one of the few birds that wears two different coats summer and winter. In March the plumage begins to change from all white to a mottled combination of white, brown and black. In the fall it loses the black and brown feathers and its new coat is pure white to blend with the snow. The legs and feet are feathered. The bill is black.

Perhaps the ptarmigan is aware of its protective color since it has little sense of fear. It is easy to approach these birds; when flushed they fly only a short distance, and escape by running and squatting among rocks.

Ptarmigan live in small flocks in winter. The nest is usually lined with a little grass and located between rocks. The diet consists chiefly of grass, leaves, stalks and flowers of alpine plants in the summer, and buds and pine needles in the winter. The call is a kind of cluck or cackle.



C. E. HAGIE

There are three essentials which game birds require for survival. They require a reasonable amount of land in which to range, and of course they must have food. This well-camouflaged sage grouse chick illustrates the third requirement, cover—a sanctuary from storms and predators.

Back Cover: *Scaled Quail*—painting by Charles Hjelte —————→

