

## AMERICA'S WILD CHICKENS

Most natural environments in the United States once had at least one kind of Nature's wild chickens, the upland game birds. Just as there are many kinds of environments--forests, deserts, prairies--there also are many species of upland game birds, each adapted to live in one of these environments. To this group of native American birds belong the quails, grouse, wild turkey, and chachalaca. Like domestic chickens they are ground dwellers. They scratch chickenlike in the earth for seeds, grubs, insects, bulblets, and gravel. Some cluck, others crow, cackle, or whistle. They range in size from the little Bobwhite of 6 or 7 ounces to the Wild Turkey that weighs 15 or 20 pounds.

### QUAILS

A farm in the eastern United States without its Bobwhite Quail is rare. Perched on a fence post near a brushy gully, the chunky little male whistles his cheerful Bob-bob-white. In summer after the family is raised, Bob and his mate may even come into your garden looking for insects. He is a valued friend of the farmer and gardener. He never harms crops and throughout the summer eats thousands of weed seeds, grasshoppers, beetles, and potato bugs. Many farmers leave brush in fence rows and along roadsides for their quail; some leave patches of grain at the edge of the fields. This means the birds will have places to hide from their enemies and to build their nests; and the covey will have food when the snows come.



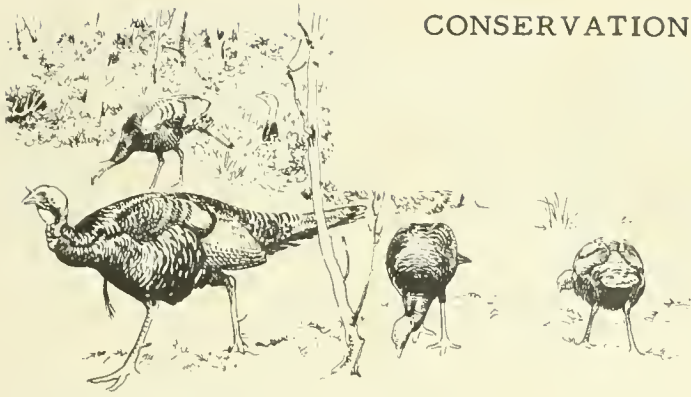
Bobwhite Quail

The Scaled Quail or Blue Quail belongs to our arid Southwest. The somber blue-gray birds are easily recognized by their short white-tipped crests and scale-patterned breasts. They frequent the mouths of canyons and weedy, grassy washes and river valleys. They become very tame about ranches where they go for water; often their nests are found in nearby haystacks. When startled they run swiftly under a clump of cactus or sagebrush. Scaled Quail may be numerous one year and scarce the next; heavy rains or drought during the nesting season kills many chicks. Heavy grazing has reduced their numbers many places. Grazing cattle strip the land of grass and brush the birds need to hide their nests and protect them from their enemies.



Chachalaca





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Scaled Quail

Another upland game bird of our Southwest is the unusual Mearns' Quail. Its little clown face and elaborately patterned back makes it one of our handsomest quail. A gentle bird, it walks quietly among the rank grasses of the mountain woodland. It stops often to dig in the earth with its large, strong feet. When alarmed it squats and freezes. Depending on its protective coloring to hide it, it does not fly until almost stepped on. Then it literally explodes under your feet. This quail is a late nester--usually nesting in August. It waits for the late summer rains to revive the dry vegetation before it brings off its broods.



Gambel's Quail

The beautiful Gambel's Quail or Desert Quail live in hot, dry deserts of the Southwest. They are most often found in brushy desert washes and mountain ravines or in dense groves of willow or mesquite bordering streams. They live in wild, rough country among thorny shrubs. When frightened, they run swiftly taking refuge in almost inaccessible places in mountain canyons or along rock-strewn creek banks. Nesting is dictated by the weather. The Gambel's Quail wait for the late summer rains and the greening-up of the desert plants before they nest. In very dry years they do not nest.



California Quail

The shy Mountain Quail of our Pacific coast mountains is America's largest quail. It is easily known by the long, straight head plume and broad white stripes on its brown sides. Mountain Quail summer in the high mountains and winter in the lower canyons and foothills. The trip up and down the mountain, often 40 miles long, is made on foot. They feed early in the morning and just before dark, scratching as vigorously in the earth as a domestic chicken. They scatter quickly when disturbed, slipping along under cover until a safe distance away before they fly.

The graceful little California Quail is also a bird of the foothills and valleys of the West. Favorite areas are woodlands near weedy, overgrown fields or vineyards and patches of oaks in foothills and along brushy stream banks. Coveys of half-tame birds in their blue-gray plumage and pert black head plumes may be seen feeding in rural gardens and city parks. Several birds take turns watching as the covey feeds. At night the quail roost in low trees or tall bushes. With approach of the nesting season, the coveys break up as the paired birds leave to assume family duties. The male is a faithful mate and father. If danger threatens he will risk his life to save his brood. When the young are grown the family groups combine to form coveys again.



Mearns' Quail



GROUSE

Sage Grouse

The slaty-gray Blue Grouse is the common grouse of the western mountains. As if aware that they cannot be seen easily in the dim forest light, the grouse sit quietly watching the intruder. When frightened they cackle like scared chickens and fly down the mountainside with amazing speed for all their 3 or 4 pounds. In late summer the birds move into the high mountains. They winter in the spruce and fir forests, seldom leaving the trees. In late spring they return to the sunny lower valleys and foothills to nest, walking all the way. On the nesting grounds the courting males flutter and hoot. Humph-humph-humph-ma-humph they grunt softly, inflating the bright-colored skin at their throats. The call, like the hoot of an owl, seems far away but the bird may be nearby. The hens hide their nests so well that few have ever been found.



Blue Grouse

The Ruffed Grouse is found in open forests of northern North America. It can rise swiftly on powerful wings and change its course quickly, dodging tree limbs at 30 or 40 miles an hour. It winters in the deepest part of the woods, spending most of the time in the trees. In severe winters it often dives into a snowbank for shelter. The males are famous for their drumming during the nesting season. A favored spot is near an old logging road. Standing on an old log, with his shining black ruff raised about his head and black-banded tail spread in a fan, the grouse begins to drum. He lifts his wings forward and upward, slowly at first then faster and faster until the wings seem to disappear in a blur. On the quiet morning air floats a low throbbing, rumbling sound like distant thunder or the put-put of an outboard motor starting.



Ruffed Grouse

The slate-colored Spruce Grouse lives in northern wildernesses of tangled swamps and in fir and spruce forests with their thick carpets of moss. Because it has no fear of man it is often called the fool hen. It has steadily disappeared as settlement opened up the northern forests. It is a silent bird and usually is seen alone except for family groups. During the nesting season the handsome male struts about forest openings. Intermittently he inflates the red skin over his eyes, whirs his wings, and struts. Now and then, as in sheer exuberance, he flits between a tree limb and the ground. The hen hides her nest under a low spruce bough or in the deep moss of the forest floor. She blends so well with her surroundings that one may pass closely and never see her sitting quietly on her nest.



Spruce Grouse

In high mountain country and in the Arctic live small grouse that change their dark summer plumage for a white coat when winter comes. They are the ptarmigans.





Ptarmigan

The White-tailed Ptarmigan, or Snow Quail of the miners, live above timberline in our western mountains. In summer their mottled brown garb imitates the rocky surroundings so closely that the birds are almost invisible. In winter pure white feathers hide them in the snow. When strong winds lash the high plateaus, the White-tailed Ptarmigan dig hollows in the snow. There they lie facing into the wind until the storm passes.

The Willow Ptarmigan live in the Arctic, nesting in the low, open tundra along the coast, at edge of marshes, and on willow-covered hillsides. The aggressive males vigorously defend their mates and broods, flying bravely at any intruder. In late fall the birds begin to shed their brown coats and by winter have grown yellow-tinged white ones. Nature provides them with snowshoes--long, coarse hairs that cover the feet--to help them move easily on deep snow. The Willow Ptarmigan move into the sheltered inland valleys in winter to avoid the extreme cold of the sea-coasts. Here they feed on willow and alder buds until spring again draws them to their coastal nesting grounds.



Prairie Chicken

The Rock Ptarmigan live in the barest and rockiest barrens of northern Alaska. In their pink-tinged winter plumage, the birds dig deeply in the snow for food with heavily feathered, sharply clawed feet. When the long arctic night comes they often gather in large flocks and fly southward out of the continuous darkness. Low over the land, rising and falling with its contour, the flocks fly fast and long. They often cross large bodies of water. In late spring, the male shows his preference for his chosen mate by running in circles about her, dragging his wings and pushing himself along on his breast. The hardy hen nests on the open tundra near a small bush or large rock. Her coarsely mottled coat blends perfectly with the rocky terrain.



Sharp-tailed Grouse

The Prairie Chicken is a henlike grouse with softly barred brown and white feathers. It is a true child of the prairies and disappears when the grasslands are plowed. In spring the birds gather at some favored spot on the prairie to boom and dance. As day breaks, the dance begins with the rapid patting of many feet. Then with lowered head, dragging wings, and widely spread tail, the cocks strut about. The loose skin at the throat swells into two orange-colored balloons and black neck tufts stand erect. With a sudden twist of the head, cock after cock jerks out a resonant boom that vibrates over the still, cold air. Suddenly several birds cackle loudly and spring into the air, twisting and turning. On the ground again they rush the nearest bird. Nearby, the hens feed quietly, apparently unmindful of the violent courtship antics of the males.

The Sharp-tailed Grouse gets its name from its sharply pointed tail. This helps you distinguish it from its relative, the Prairie Chicken, which has a bluntly rounded tail. The Sharp-tail lives in brushlands and rolling, grassy country. It spends most of the year on the ground but in winter it often is seen in tree-tops, feeding on buds. On very cold nights it digs into a snowbank, making its bed several inches under the snow. When spring comes, it, too, performs a peculiar dance on ancestral "dancing grounds." The Sharp-tail has disappeared from many parts of its former range in the United States. It has disappeared from some because of intensive farming and from others, as in Wisconsin and Michigan, because of the reforesting of many areas.

The Sage Grouse is our second largest upland game bird. Males often weigh 6 to 8 pounds and their wings may measure 40 inches or more from tip to tip. This grouse spends the hot, dry summer in the sagebrush and alfalfa fields in the moister foothills. It returns to the warmer deserts when the snow begins to fall. In spring the males gather on their "strutting grounds." They walk about with breasts puffed out in turkey-cock fashion. High over their backs they hold their widely spread, many-pointed tails. Sage Grouse were once very common on our western plains, but during settlement of the West they nearly became extinct. Excessive shooting and grazing almost destroyed them. In recent years protective State laws and controlled grazing of cattle on public lands have been bringing them back.

#### WILD TURKEY

The Wild Turkey is our largest and probably our wariest game bird. It resembles the common turkey, but is more streamlined and has a brown-tipped tail. (The domestic turkey is heavy bodied and has a white-tipped tail.) Despite its great size, the Wild Turkey roosts in trees at night and during bad weather. It travels far on powerful legs, covering 4 or 5 square miles in a day seeking food and water. Fires, severe droughts, over-shooting, and land clearing caused the Wild Turkey to disappear from much of its range by 1910. But in recent years the Turkey has been increasing. Some States have helped by stocking birds in suitable places and protecting them from predators and over-shooting. Today the Wild Turkey is widely distributed over the country. It even is found in States where it did not formerly occur.



Chukar

#### CHACHALACA

The long-tailed Chachalaca makes its home in dense jungles of ebony, palmetto, and thorny shrubs along the Rio Grande. It is a Central American bird that lives as far north as the southernmost tip of Texas. In early morning and at dusk the discordant cries of the birds, Cha-cha-lac, are heard. The hen builds her nest of interlaced twigs in the dense foliage of a small tree. She carries her chicks to the ground, clinging tightly to her legs, as soon as their feathers are dry. Land clearing along the Rio Grande is destroying the living areas of the Chachalaca in Texas. To save these unusual birds the State is acquiring tracts of brushland in the lower Rio Grande Valley as refuge areas.



Wild Turkey

#### BIRDS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

Through the years our upland game birds have disappeared from many parts of the United States. Into these places left vacant by our native birds we have introduced birds from other countries. Ring-necked Pheasants from Europe and Asia have grown abundant on grain farms of the Great Plains. Hungarian Partridges thrive in highly agricultural areas of the northern plains and prairies. Chukars prosper in barren, rocky wastes of the West on lands not used to any extent by native birds.



Hungarian Partridge

If you wish more information on the ranges of these birds send 30¢ to the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington 25, D. C., and ask for Circular 34, Distribution of American Gallinaceous Birds.

Pheasant



These upland game birds do not migrate; the States in which they live have control over them and set the hunting seasons. The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife is directed by the Congress to conduct research on them and help the States keep them in suitable numbers.

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