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With the Mearns Quail in Southwestern Texas

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IF all the bizarre and curious creatures that live in our county, it would be hard to find one more arbitrarily marked, or colored more apparently in opposition to all the laws of protective gradation and coloration than the Mearns quail, or as has been longer known, the Massena partridge or "Fool Quail." It is especially noticeable in this case since the other genera in the family are among the most remarkable exponents of the perfection of 'locality painting,' being dark above, where the most light strikes them, and pale below, where the shadow comes, thus making a monotoned ground upon which the most exquisite detail of scenery is painted. This assists the creature to be assimilated into its natural setting to a degree which only those who have come face to face with a sitting grouse or quail can truly appreciate. Therefore, when we see the fantastic little cock Massena with his dark chestnut breast, jet black belly and flanks, and harlequin-painted head, it is hard to conceive how he was ever able to qualify in the race for survival among a group of birds so marvellously protected as his congeners.

With the prospect of a field trip into the "Big Bend Country" in western Texas, I looked forward with the keenest pleasure to meeting the Mearns quail (*Cyrtonyx montezumæ mearnsi*) for I felt sure that he would, in some ingenious way, justify his bold deviation from his family's stock traits. The accounts I had heard of his stupid tameness made me wonder the more, for it is a fairly good rule that those birds most beautifully assimilable in their natural landscape, rely on their inconspicuousness the most, and those, which do not thus hide in 'full view' take flight or run on the apprehension of danger. Here seemed to be a strong contradiction, which I hoped to solve.

Our first invasion into his territory was in the Chisos mountains, at the extreme reach of the "Big Bend" of the Rio Grande. After a long hot ride, we finally ascended the foot-slopes at about sunset, and worked into a dwindling trail which finally became lost in an old arroyo, coming down from a great gulch in the mountains. We camped at last by a 'well' that one of our number discovered in the brush about fifty yards from the trail, and tired and hungry almost to oblivion, we ate our bacon, beans, and biscuit, and rolled up in our blankets in the beautiful glow of the full moon.

I awoke in the cool, just before sun-up, and was lazily dressing, half out of my sleeping-bag, when my sleepy eye caught a slight motion in the grass about twenty feet away. I looked and became aware that I was staring at my first Mearns quail. Even as I took in the fact, he apparently framed up his ideas as to *his* vision, and telling himself in a quiet little quail-voice that it were perhaps as well to move on and look from a safer distance, he slimmed down his trim little form and ran a few steps. Meanwhile I was clumsily trying to get my gun out from under my sleeping bag, where I had put it to keep it out of the dew. The quail, getting wiser every second, doubled his trot, and with head erect and body trim ran like a plover for a few yards through the short desert grass, and with a true quail *f-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r* burst into flight and dropped into the thick brush across the arroyo. The most noticeable thing about him as I watched him running was the curious use of his queer little crest. Instead of elevating it as the mountain quail does his, he raised his painted head on slim neck and spread his flowing crest *laterally*, till it looked like half a mushroom, giving him the most curious appearance imaginable. When he flew I marked him down carefully, hastily drew my boots half on, grabbed my gun and stumped after him with all speed. I got to his point within a short time, but thrash and kick around as I might, I never succeeded in making him flush a second time. Thus ended the first chance.

Later, when we had reached the foot of the gulch and made camp under a noble old pinyon, we had opportunity to learn more about the quail, tho we never had such a good view as that first one. A curious, quavering, owl-like cry attracted our novelty-seeking ears. A pigmy owl perhaps? Tho frequently heard in the scrubby oaks at the edge of the woods, or even *in* the woods, it proved a true will-o-the-wisp, and invariably led us out into the basting-hot brush on the hillside, among the cacti and slide-rock. At first we approached it cautiously, or carefully tried to 'round it up' by going to either side of it. But it always eluded us, and we had only our guesses to tell what it was. We were beginning to guess right, however, and one lucid day I decided to waste no more time. So the next time the sad little cry sounded, off I went toward it as fast as possible, until I thought I was near the place. Then I stopped and listened. Again! Only waiting long enough to ascertain that the sound came from a particularly dense bunch of *Dasylerion*, cactus and other desert brush, I jumped in and made for the place, never heeding the noise I was making. On, to the point, and right on, when *frrrrrrrrrr*, out boiled a cock *Massena*, and *frrrrrrrrr*, out went the hen after him at another angle. I was nearly ready, but not quite, and by the time I was 'on' him he had dropped, woodcock-like, after a flight of only a rod or two. So, also, had the hen. So there were no quail for me this time, as I was unable to flush them again. But I had "found a wy," and knew that some day I'd make it succeed. Later I had the pleasure of seeing a beautiful cock, shot by one of the others, and the next day the strange pinkish hen was brought in. With a wider knowledge of the bird's ways and the kind of cover he preferred, his curious markings seemed less of a contradiction. Many partridges have black or very dark ventral patches which

they obviate by squatting: the Gambel partridge, chestnut-bellied scaled quail, the European partridge and others; and Mearns quail has this same thing only to a greater extent. He chooses the densest and deepest brush cover for a retreat, and like the meadowlark keeps his wonderfully graded back toward the danger-side. The illustration^a from Mr. Bailey's photograph shows how easily he becomes inconspicuous by this simple trick, and it is fair to attribute his black ventral markings to other causes than that of direct protection when offset by the facts of his chosen cover and the remarkably protective character of his upper parts. And like many other sharply marked creatures, the very contrasts which look so conspicuous when seen in the hand, isolated from the sharp lights and shadows of the natural environment, serve to so 'cut up' the creature that in nature all semblance of a bird is lost; the head is cut from the body, and then reduced to a non-committal jumble, which is one with what lies beyond.

In the gulch near where we were camped was a lovely little mountain brook, coming from a seep-basin high in the mountains, tumbling as a thread-like fall from a tall cliff at the head of the gulch, a mile above camp. In the canyon were noble jack oaks, gnarly arbutus trees, and a few nut-studded pines, and upon the steep talus slope stood a splendid grove of tall conifers. This place was naturally the center of bird life, and here we found for the first time within our borders the Couch jay (*Aphelocoma sieberi couchi*). Stephens whip-poor-wills (*Antrostomus v. macromystax*), and band-tailed pigeons (*Columba fasciata*) were here, and numbers of 'carpinteros,' the noisy and sociable ant-eating woodpeckers (*Melanerpes formicivorus*). Occasionally a big blue-throated hummer (*Celi-gena clemenciae*) would come skittling up the gulch, for all the world like a little swift, uttering his sharp little squeak every two seconds. Perhaps he would alight on the

dead lower twigs of a drooping pine branch, and jumble his squeaks together into a kind of little song: more likely he would zip by like a bullet and disappear up the gulch. These and many other rare and interesting birds made me temporarily neglect the quail, after a few more failures, and I left the Chisos without a single bird.

But my hope was yet young, and as we moved up toward the Davis mountains I had visions of a brace. These, like the first, failed to materialize, as did those which I harbored for the Sacramento in New Mexico.

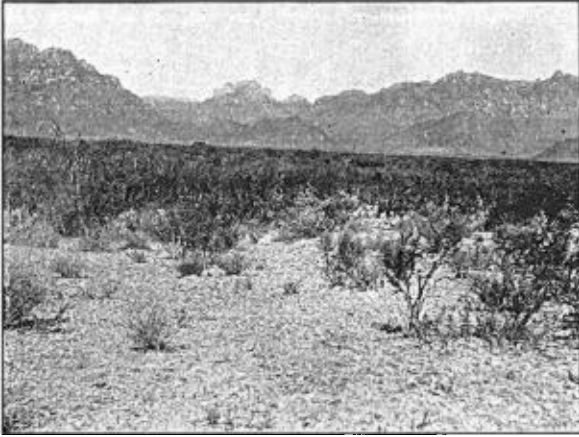
Late in the summer we left Carlsbad, New Mexico, with our outfit, heading for the Guadalupe mountains, the "Walloopias" of the natives, for our last mountain work of the season. Up we went from the Pecos desert into the juniper-clad foot-hills, where we camped our first night. In the morning I looked around, and was surprised at what I saw. Indeed, I rubbed my eyes to see if I



MEARNS QUAIL
FROM A DRAWING BY THE AUTHOR

a. For the use of this and the photograph of the Chisos Mts. acknowledgements are due to Mr. Vernon Bailey, and the Biological Survey.—ED.

were seeing aright. *Goats in trees!* Yes, it was all right, and there in the sprawling junipers, feeding or resting, were numbers of white Angora goats, the chief product of the country, as comfortably at home as cats! We soon left the goat



CHISOS MOUNTAINS FROM BELOW ROCK SPRING

country, and went up through the bigger growth of the upper Transition Zone, and finally came down again into the semi-tropical atmosphere of 'Dog Canyon'. Up through this broad, waterless, sun-baked basin we worked, until sixty miles further up we came again into the junipers and yellow pines. Oak-covered hills rose at our sides and ahead of us, ending in barren rock ridges fifteen hundred or two thousand feet above us. The high gulches were rich in timber but poor in surface water. This place was the last stand of the Mescalero Apaches, and their weed-grown mescal pits, arrowheads and bits of broken pottery gave evidence of their happy days as plainly as the corroded cartridges of the old Government "Henry .50's" that we found, attested to their final destruction. New things attracted us here, and our stay of four days was among the pleasantest of our summer's experiences. The gulches offered most of interest, so three of our days were spent in working between camp and the crests, 8500 feet above sea. But we had come into this camp in the late afternoon, and had had no opportunity to look over the hot basin.

So I decided, on our last afternoon, to make a good strong search of the lower levels, and started from camp at about two o'clock with a visitor who had "met up with us," and who said he would like to go out. We went 'down gulch,' and had hardly been out half an hour when we heard the old familiar seductive call: Mearns quail three points off the weather bow!

Well, soon after we put them up: my friend got one and I another. They were cock and hen, both well shot and in strangely good feather for the time of year. He was good enough to say he had shot his for me, and in less than an hour I was back at camp, happy as a king, painting *my* Mearns quail. Thus ended the last chance, for the next day before sun-up we broke camp and left the mountains for good.



MEARNS QUAIL, WHITE MTS., N. M.