

# Gambel's Quail



ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

The Gambel's is the only species of quail endemic to the Sonoran Desert. Its range in Arizona is primarily in that desert, but it also can be found on the Arizona Strip north and west of the Colorado River.

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Callipepla gambelii* is from the Greek *kallipeplos*, meaning “beautifully adorned,” and the Latinized form of naturalist William Gambel's name.

**DESCRIPTION:** Gambel's quail are a sexually dimorphic species, meaning males look different from females. Males have a black topknot and a chestnut-colored crown above a black face bordered by a white line. The back is gray, the breast is buff-colored, and there is a black circular or horseshoe-shaped patch on the abdomen. Females have a duller overall appearance, with a gray topknot, head and body. Both sexes have the distinctive topknot consisting of five or six feathers in the shape of a teardrop, and flank feathers that are cinnamon in color with a white center stripe. Females weigh 5.6–6 ounces; males 6–7 ounces. The average length is less than 10 inches.

**DISTRIBUTION:** The Gambel's is the only species of quail endemic to the Sonoran Desert. Its range in Arizona is primarily in that desert, but it also can be found on the Arizona Strip north and west of the Colorado River. From Arizona, this bird's distribution extends throughout the Sonoran Desert into parts of California and along the west coast of the Sea of Cortez in Mexico. It also stretches into Nevada, Utah, Colorado and southern New Mexico, and follows the Rio Grande into Texas. Two populations of translocated Gambel's quail are found in Idaho and on the island of Lanai in Hawaii.

**HABITAT:** This quail typically can be found in the thick chaparral and diverse shrub vegetation types of the Sonoran, Chihuahuan and Mohave deserts. The honey mesquite tree's range overlaps that of the Gambel's quail, and these

birds use it extensively throughout the year as a food resource and for roosting cover.

**BIOLOGY:** Males and females begin to pair up in late February and early March, and egg-laying peaks between April and May. Nest sites range from completely exposed to hidden and sheltered. On average, females lay one egg per day until they are finished, then begin incubation, which lasts 21 to 23 days. Clutch size is normally 10–12 eggs. Chicks are reared by both parents in a covey from birth until covey break-up in late winter. Then pairing begins again.

This bird's main source of food is seeds, but depending on seasonal availability, Gambel's quail also eat cactus fruits, insects and forbs. Reproductive organ development is influenced by vitamin A reserves in the liver. The birds obtain the vitamin from plants produced by winter rains. Winter precipitation is the single largest factor affecting Gambel's quail populations.

Gambel's quail roost high up in trees rather than on the ground. Males are very vocal throughout the year. They have a distinctive call that mirrors the enunciation of the word “Chicago.”

**STATUS:** The Gambel's quail is a hunted game species in Arizona and throughout most of its range.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** There are no special management needs for Gambel's quail at this time, as they have abundant suitable habitat. However, their habitat is experiencing a drought and could benefit from more rain, which would boost their populations. 🦋

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