

Unraveling the Mysteries of Montezuma Quail

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Like northern bobwhites, Montezuma quail are sexually dimorphic with males exhibiting elaborate coloration and females sporting drab plumage.

No other quail in Texas is more mysterious than the Montezuma. Montezuma quail are known by a variety of names, including Mearns' quail, black quail, crazy quail, fool's quail and harlequin quail. These names reveal some of their more common characteristics — their peculiarity. With an oversized, bluish bill; bugged-out eyes; raptor-like claws and striking coloration, Montezuma quail certainly stand out from the smaller quails in the state (bobwhite, scaled, and Gambel's).

Starting back as early as 1999, the Borderlands Research Institute has been studying this peculiar quail in West Texas, southern Arizona, and northern Mexico to better understand this peculiar quail. Below, we

have provided a summary of some of the more interesting observations and findings from those studies.

Distribution

Montezuma quail once ranged

throughout West Texas and the majority of the Edwards Plateau. In fact, early records place Montezuma quail as far east as Bexar County (San Antonio) and as far north as Tom Green County

(San Angelo). However, their distribution is currently restricted to a small population around the Real, Kinney, Edwards counties region and the desert grasslands and mountains of the Trans-Pecos.

Behavior

Montezuma quail are masters at camouflage. More than other quails, Montezuma are reluctant to fly and opt for crouching down or remaining motionless to evade predators. In good habitat, they are virtually invisible. They are almost impossible to detect in good cover. Good cover comes in the form of perennial bunchgrasses like bluestems and sideoats grama. Many unsuspecting wanderers are first introduced to Montezuma



Montezuma quail.





The mottled appearance of this female Montezuma blends in well with her surroundings.

quail as they burst into air from underneath their feet. Motorists often see Montezuma quail along roadsides or in the middle of the road. Unfortunately, the invisibility defense strategy does not fare well for Montezuma quail when they are trying to disappear into the asphalt-covered highway. Collision and death are common results.

Habitat

Aside from abundant cover provided by perennial grasses, Montezuma quail require subterranean foods. Unlike their seed-eating cousins, the diet of Montezuma quail favors bulbs, tubers, rhizomes and other subterranean roots. All gallinaceous (chicken-like) birds scratch to reveal

seeds and other foods, but Montezuma quail dig for their meals. Montezuma quail are well-equipped for digging for their meals with their strong legs and elongated claws. Another element that is common in Montezuma quail habitat is topography. Montezuma quail inhabit most of the larger mountain ranges of the Trans-Pecos at elevation higher than 4,000 feet. Pine and oaks intertwined with bunchgrasses along gentle to steep slopes typify Montezuma quail habitat.

Classification

All quail species in Texas are classified as game birds. However, Montezuma quail have a closed season. Montezuma quail have not

been legally hunted in Texas in over 30 years. With such a long span with a closed season, Montezuma quail are inadvertently referred to as the “nongame game bird.” In fact, Montezuma quail sightings are coveted by the growing ecotourism industry of the Big Bend region -- so much so that Montezuma quail have been adopted as the flagship species for the region where the Davis Mountains State Park has successfully marketed Montezuma quail sightings by providing several viewing areas that are frequented by this elusive bird.

Montezuma quail have many other peculiar features that make them unique compared to Texas’ other quail, including covey size and composition,



To evade predators, Montezuma quail crouch down and remain motionless.



Strong legs and pronounced claws make the Montezuma quail a natural for digging for subterranean foods like tubers and bulbs.

sex ratios, movements, vocalizations, dispersal strategies and reproductive seasons. We are currently in our third year of an extensive radio telemetry study that will help unravel the mysteries of Texas’ Montezuma quail. 🐦

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