

# Western Birds

The  
Wingshooter's  
Newsletter



Upland Opener Forecast

October 16, 2017

## This year *is not* 2010 all over again, but some areas are nearly that good

They're baaaaaack.

For upland bird hunters who have left their shotguns idle the past two or three seasons because quail and chukar numbers have been so low, this is the year the dust can be wiped off those shotguns and actions oiled up. Upland bird numbers have recovered – dramatically so in some areas, less so in others, but better across the board throughout Southern California.

However, in some areas, both quail and chukar are still going to have just fair overall numbers of birds even after excellent hatches this year. The problem for many regions is simply that bird numbers were so low, that even with good production this spring, overall numbers are still just fair.

“In my surveys, there were guzzlers where there were no birds or just one or two pairs last year – it got down that low,” said David Hardt with the Taft Sportsman’s Club. Hardt, the former refuge manager at the Kern National Wildlife Refuge, has been conducting brood surveys as a volunteer for the Department of Fish and Wildlife in the Temblor and Caliente mountains



ranges west of Taft.

“It’s amazing the effect the drought had, but it’s also amazing how well the birds can recover when conditions improve,” said Hardt.

Hardt said that there was a good hatch the spring of 2016, but the number of breeding birds was so low that it merely created small coveys where there had only been little groups of two to four birds. But that production led to a more holdover birds for the 2017 production year, which was also wet. This spring’s production saw bird numbers increase significantly, but

the quail population still hadn’t reached the level he is accustomed to seeing in the area.

“It’s a better year, better than the last four or five years. If we could get a wet year this year, we’d be crawling with birds again,” said Hardt.

The Temblor and Caliente region had the worst-case scenario for the 2017 Southern California season, while the region with the brightest prospects is the vast eastern Mojave Desert, especially the Mojave National (Continued on Page 3, See *Opener*...)

# Commentary

## Guzzlers and bureaucrats

It is getting wearisome dealing with some of the bureaucrats within the different federal land management agencies for volunteer groups merely wanting to repair and restore guzzlers so they continue to provide water for wildlife.

This isn't an across-the-board problem. It has been isolated to staff within different local offices and headquarters. The superintendent of the Mojave National Preserve has thrown up unnecessary roadblocks on Cliff McDonald (Water for Wildlife) and his volunteers from continuing to do routine maintenance on existing guzzlers within the Preserve. The restoration had been going on for seven years before Sues got there, but now it has been stopped pending the completion on "studies" and "analysis" that don't apply really to the guzzler work. Bureaucrats in the Needles office of the Bureau of Land Management also stopped McDonald's work on those federal lands temporarily — long enough for an entire season of restorations to be lost. The Barstow office of the BLM stopped the High Desert Quail Forever Chapter from completing work on the Shadow Mountains guzzlers (covered in this issue) *after* an agreement was reached. This led to a loss of grant money the group had obtained to do the work.

Meanwhile, the BLM and U.S. Forest Service in the Bishop region have begged McDonald to do restoration work on their guzzlers. The San Bernardino National Forest has been working cooperatively with Quail Forever and the California Deer Association (sometimes very slowly, but...). And the list of government agencies cooperating with the volunteers is long and grateful.

So where does resistance originate?

There is no doubt that *some* of the resistance from *some* of the people within the federal bureaucracy is semi-legitimate. There are so many vague mandates they must follow that they are paralyzed by the fear of doing anything. Lawsuits and ridicule from friends in the local environmental community are just one decision away. But mostly there is a simple bias against hunters. *If hunters are doing the work, there must be an evil motive. It has to be bad*, is what they think and even say. To an increasing percentage of federal employees in these agencies, hunting is an arcane practice carried out by gun-toting, wildlife murderers. In their minds, hunters have no real concern for the resource — well over 100 years of sterling conservation history ignored or revised into a made-up negative narrative. The whole "tortoises drown in guzzlers" story is one blatant lie they try to sell.

So, these bureaucrats use their interpretation of these vague regulations to stop guzzler restoration. Eventually, someone up the chain of command is exposed to a sniff of this stink and it ends. Sometimes it ends civilly. Sometimes it ends with a transfer of staff, eliminating the problem here.

Dan Connelly, the state director with Quail Forever and former career Department of Fish and Wildlife employee, has been working on agency-wide solutions to this problem. Dan has gone to the main regional or national offices of these federal agencies and has been working out Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreements that will apply to all the offices. The local anti-hunter, anti-man-made water sources, anti-hands-on-conservation decisions will someday — hopefully someday soon — be eliminated from the guzzler restoration decision equation.



## Western Birds

The Wingshooter's Newsletter

*Western Birds* is published whenever we see fit. It's that simple. Don't panic. We used to publish monthly issues from August through December and then one other issue sometime between January and June for a total of six, eight-page issues per year. We don't meet that schedule any more, and make no promises on how many issues we do each year and when we'll get them out. We're shooting for at least four issues each year, but don't hold us to that for now. We do promise, however, that you will get at least 48 pages of newsletter for each "year" of your subscription. That fair?

Regular subscription price is \$150 per "year" or \$270 for a two-year subscription, or \$375 for three years. Checks should be made out to *Western Birds*.

The subscription price includes not only the printed newsletter, but we also publish special e-mail editions for the dove and upland openers, and occasional other things, that are publically posted on the website.

This is the free special Upland Bird Forecast issue of *Western Birds* that is available to all hunters. Please feel free to share this digital edition.

Editor:  
Jim Matthews  
909-887-3444 office  
909-553-0408 cell  
909-887-8180 fax

E-Mail addresses:  
[chukarinsane@gmail.com](mailto:chukarinsane@gmail.com)  
[odwriter@verizon.net](mailto:odwriter@verizon.net)

Web Site:  
[www.OutdoorNewsService.com](http://www.OutdoorNewsService.com)

Facebook:  
[www.facebook.com/pages/Western-Birds/128544773832003](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Western-Birds/128544773832003)

**Western Birds**  
P.O. Box 9007  
San Bernardino, CA 92427-0007

# Upland Forecast

---

## Opener...

(Continued from Page 1)  
Preserve.

Cliff McDonald, the founder and ramrod behind Water for Wildlife, the group that restores guzzlers and springs for wildlife in the East Mojave, said that on the youth quail hunt Oct. 14 “we jumped 150 or more quail where I hadn’t seen any in the past two years.” He added that they saw birds in almost every spot they checked in the Mid Hills and New York Mountains.

Todd Siron, an avid Las Vegas bird hunter and new *Western Birds* subscriber, said he’s been scouting the Preserve all summer, and reported that on one trip he saw 17 coveys of Gambel’s quail and 600-plus quail overall.

“I went a few more times three or four weeks ago and saw a lot of birds. It looks like there were two or three hatches this year, and all of the coveys had 50 birds or so,” said Siron.

Most other places across Southern California are in between these two extremes. The further north and east you go from major urban areas in Southern California, the better the conditions were for nesting this spring and the better the bird numbers. Here’s a region-by-region update from actual eyes-on-the-ground reports:

### **SIERRA, WHITE, AND INYO MOUNTAINS:**

The eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, along with the Inyo and White mountain ranges on the east side of the Owens Valley, all had much better quail and chukar production the spring of 2017 and bird numbers have recovered so that overall numbers are fair to good. Some of the dryer mountain ranges didn’t get as much moisture, but overall the prospects look good.

In the south end of the Sierra, all of the major drainages on the west side of Highway 14 from Red Rock Canyon State Park (closed to hunting) north past this Highway’s junction with Highway 395 had good production and enough holdover birds from last year to look pretty good again. Chukar numbers have rebounded, but were so low that flocks are widely dispersed. Valley quail numbers look good in most canyons, but still well below the peak numbers in 2010.

The White Mountains look particularly good for chukar this year, while the more southerly Inyo Mountains will probably be just fair with more widely scattered groups of chukar.

**RED MOUNTAIN REGION:** The Rand and El Paso Mountain ranges and other desert mountains in this area – collectively known as the Red Mountain region – is chukar central for Southern California hunters, and

the numbers of these big gamebirds have recovered from the dramatic lows of the past three seasons. They are still well below the peak numbers during 2010, but it could be considered a more normal year in this area and hunting should be pretty fair. Quail numbers in this region still are very low and recovering slowly.

**EAST MOJAVE DESERT:** The mid- to upper-elevations of the Mojave Preserve had excellent bird production and good holdover bird numbers from last year, and the result is a bumper-crop of Gambel’s quail and almost-as-good chukar production and numbers. All of the mountain ranges in the Preserve will have good to excellent hunting this year with especially good reports from the Mid Hills, New York, Castle, Woods, Providence, Ivanpah, and Piute mountain ranges. The Hackberry Mountains look very good for quail and chukar, and the Clarks and Kingston ranges have good chukar numbers again in addition to strong Gambel’s quail populations.

South of Interstate 40, the Old Woman Mountains and Sacramento Mountains didn’t have quite as wet conditions, but good enough to improve bird numbers significantly from the past few seasons and the hunting should be fair to good in this area.

**COLORADO RIVER CORRIDOR:** Quail numbers are nearly as good as in the East Mojave along the whole Colorado River corridor from Bullhead City south to Yuma. Gambel’s quail numbers have really rebounded and there have been a lot of reports of double hatches this season and large coveys.

The best numbers will be on public lands adjacent to irrigated agriculture and within two or three miles of permanent water sources where birds have access to water. Quail numbers around all of the guzzlers and springs in the desert have also jumped dramatically throughout this region.

**WEST MOJAVE:** The drought subsided in the cluster of mountain ranges in the Barstow to Lucerne Valley to Pinon Hills, collectively called the West Mojave. However, chukar numbers were so low that the rebound was modest, at best, in this area.

“Bleak,” said bird hunting guide Harold Horner. “There’s birds again, but I’m not hunting this region this year.”

The members of the High Desert Quail Forever chapter in this region said they have hauled nearly 20,000 gallons of water to area guzzlers this year to make sure the systems were all full, and Frank Rorabaugh said they tallied a total of about 500 chukar in their surveys and during water-hauling, which he called “the most in the last couple of years” but still pretty dismal overall.

(Continued on Page 4, See *Opener...*)

# Upland Forecast

---

## Opener...

(Continued from Page 3)

“On guzzler A-18 where we saw hundreds of chukar in the past, we didn’t see a single bird this year,” said Rorabaugh.

“I think we’re seeing progress with the birds. The guzzlers are not all of it [the solution], but it’s a part of it. If we have a couple of more good winters and get the grasses and forbs, we’ll get there,” said Rorabaugh, noting that the QF Chapter has restored nearly all of the guzzlers in this region to full operation. Most were damaged and dry just a decade ago.

Hunters are reminded that a lot of parallel routes and spur roads have been closed by the Bureau of Land Management this summer, so four-wheel drive roads they may have driven in the past may have “closed” signs.

**ANTELOPE VALLEY:** While most of this region is private property with increasing numbers of “No Trespassing” signs and development, a lot of the open land remains un-posted and open to hunting. The southern portions of the valley along the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains and up into the public Angeles National Forest saw very good production this year.

One hunter described the area as “three times better than last year,” and that seems to be the consensus where fair to good hunting is likely for the valley quail.

**CARRIZO PLAIN REGION:** The quail numbers in the Temblor and Caliente mountain ranges have recovered from extremely low numbers, but they are still just fair in these two mountain ranges that border the Carrizo Plain National Monument. Coveys will be small and scattered this year. Hunting will be slow to fair.

However, the further west you go toward the coast and the higher in elevation you go to the south, the better the conditions and production. The south west end of the Caliente mountains and south of Highway 166 into Los Padres National Forest will be better, but still just fair.

**VENTURA-SANTA BARBARA REGION:** The canyons in the Los Padres National Forest from Frazier Park west to Highway 33 and all the way to the coast should be fair to good this year with better numbers of holdover birds from last year’s production and good production this year.

Much of the best hunting will be in the canyons on forest lands on both the east and west sides of Highway 33 north of its junction with Lockwood Valley Road.

**YUCCA VALLEY TO INDIIO REGION:** The desert and foothill canyons on east side of the San Bernardino Mountains and both north and south of Joshua Tree Na-

tional Park have experienced better production this year with both valley and Gambel’s quail numbers recovering from very low levels on public lands, but overall numbers are still fair in this area.

**IMPERIAL VALLEY-SALTON SEA REGION:** The desert mountain ranges east of the Salton Sea have seen good hatches this year, but bird numbers are still recovering and hunting will just be fair. However, the further south and east you go in this region, the better the conditions and bird numbers.

In the eastern Imperial Valley deserts, this is the second good bird year in the row and Gambel’s quail numbers are higher than they’ve been in over 10 years, and hunting should be pretty decent on the desert side of the East Highline Canal.

**SAN DIEGO REGION:** Quail numbers have rebounded throughout the Cleveland National Forest in San Diego County, but overall numbers are still just fair. The BLM lands in the eastern side of the county are a little better, but not much. Most of this region is dense brush, and the best hunting is on the edges of recent burn areas or more arid desert sides of the ranges where the cover is less thick.

**SAN BERNARDINO-RIVERSIDE REGION:** The small pockets of huntable public land on the edges of the urban areas of western Riverside and San Bernardino counties look fair to good for hunters this season. Production was good inside the intercoastal mountain ranges, and the foothills of the San Gabriels, San Bernardino, and San Jacinto Mountains have good numbers of valley quail this year.

Most of the country is chaparral which is difficult hunting unless you can find birds in recent burns.

**REGULATIONS TO REMEMBER:** Hunters are reminded that non-lead ammunition is required for hunting chukar again this season as the state phases in its statewide lead ammunition ban by 2019. Hunters can still use lead ammunition for quail this year. You are not allowed to have lead in your possession in the field when hunting chukar.

The quail and chukar season runs from Saturday, Oct. 21 through Sunday, Jan. 28. The limit is 10 quail per day with no more than 30 in possession after the third day of the season. The chukar limit is six per day with no more than 18 in possession after the third day of the season.

**FINAL NOTE:** Hunters are encouraged to send their hunting reports and photos from this year’s opener to Jim Matthews at [odwriter@verizon.net](mailto:odwriter@verizon.net). I will be doing a detailed follow-up e-mail report to *Western Birds* subscribers and general stories for *Western Outdoor News* and a number of local newspapers.