

Western Birds

The
Wingshooter's
Newsletter



Upland Opener Forecast

October 17, 2019

Quail and chukar outlook is pretty good throughout most of Southern California

The good news for this coming weekend's quail and chukar opener is that numbers are up across most of Southern California. Bird populations are better than they have been in nearly a decade in some areas.

The bad news is that late rains during April and May appear to have wiped out (or at least severely thinned out) early broods in a number of areas, forcing renesting. This resulted in far less production that the conditions might indicate.

Areas where quail and chukar numbers are well up include most of the east and west portions of the Mojave Desert, the entire Eastern Sierra Nevada, the Owens Valley, and the Colorado River Desert. There are sections of all these areas where bird numbers are at recent highs.



Here is this year's breakdown by region:

WEST MOJAVE AREA

In the West Mojave region, that big triangle of land from Barstow on the north to the Lucerne Valley on the southeast to Hesperia on the southwest looks better for chukar than it has in a number of seasons.

Nick Rojas, a gonzo young chukar hunter and *Western Birds* subscriber, said the number of chukar in this region is "the best I've seen in a long time."

Rojas scouts extensively in July and August on the springs and guzzlers in this area, especially in the Ord and Sidewinder mountains complex and south into the Granite Mountains out of Apple Valley. Rojas said the coveys of birds at nearly all the (See *Opener...* on Page 2)

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water sources he scouted had good broods. He even reported seeing about 200-plus chukar at just one desert water source in July, obviously hitting it when a number of coveys had congregated on water.

Frank Rorabaugh, a member of the High Desert Quail Forever Chapter who is a big shaker-and-mover with the club's habitat program, also had good news for the West Mojave.

"There are definitely more birds than last year," said Rorabaugh. "During the summer months hauling water to fill guzzlers, I again found 'pockets' of chukar in various areas. This theme of small pockets of bird coveys seems to be prevalent everywhere."

Rorabaugh also said he thought there were good signs of a double hatch of chukar in many areas.

"One additional observation is that I was seeing a mix of juvenile and young birds. While hauling water in July and late August, the coveys all had a significant population of both juvenile and very young birds," said Rorabaugh.

My own poking around in this region pretty much mirrors what Rojas and Rorabaugh shared.

If there is bad news in this part of our desert, it is simply that quail numbers remain pretty dismal. Rorabaugh said he only saw one very small covey of quail in the Apple Valley-Lucerne region this year. This has been true for a very long time. Quail hunters will need to go up in elevation — into the north slopes of the San Bernardino or San Gabriel Mountains — to find quail.

As reported in the last issue of *Western Birds*, I have seen pretty decent numbers of quail around Lake Silverwood in the Summit Valley area, and there have been pretty good reports from Juniper Flat to the east and all the way around into Rattlesnake Canyon further east.

Once you get up into the mountains and over the crest into the urban side of the mountains, quail numbers have been far more spotty, likely because of the late spring rains. Where I live in north San Bernardino, the quail numbers from here up into Cajon Pass are still very low with some areas showing almost no production this year.

EAST MOJAVE/MOJAVE PRESERVE

The Mojave Preserve and desert regions both north and south of the Preserve look to be pretty good this year, but many of us who have hunted the region for years are seeing fewer coveys than in the past

Cliff McDonald, the ramrod behind Desert Drinkers

4 Wildlife (formerly Water for Wildlife), said he has seen very young quail just five weeks ago.

"I think they were on their fourth hatch. I was seeing little ones just three weeks before the youth hunt on the Mojave Preserve," said McDonald.

This part of the east Mojave also had a good hatch last year, and McDonald said he was seeing more Gambel's quail than last year.

"We took kids to five spots during the youth hunt, and got into birds everywhere we stopped," said McDonald. "There are definitely more birds this year."

The Oct. 4-5 Youth Hunt a couple of weekends ago showed bird numbers were pretty good. Subscriber Jeremy Corselli had his teenage kids, Grace and Lucas (in photo below), out to hunt with McDonald, and said, "Grace was rusty on her shooting and so was Lucas. They had lots of opportunities though." Grace ended up with nine birds on Saturday. No bad for being rusty.

But the news from the National Park Service about its plan to remove or abandon over 120 of the 130 guzzlers on the Preserve can be considered bad news for wildlife in this part of the desert. With the BLM increasingly reluctant to allow repairs on old systems, there is a long term decline in bird distribution and overall numbers taking place. This dates back to the creation of the Preserve when the first superintendent directed the removal of over 100 of the cattle water sources — which were just as important to wildlife. The region has been declining since.

Rorabaugh, who helped guide kids during McDonald's youth hunt, is concerned about the loss of water, in spite of seeing pretty good numbers of quail.

"I went out a week early [before the youth hunt] to scout for quail and found good pockets of quail (coveys of 20 to 40 birds), but not widespread coveys like yesteryear when widespread water from cattle operations was available.

"I also found many of the Mojave guzzlers dry, clearly indicating a less than normal monsoon season across the (Continued on Page 3, See Opener...)



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Preserve. The dry units were ones we have repaired, so the absence of water is not due to a leaking unit, but to a lack of rain,” said Rorabaugh.

Rorabaugh normally hauls water to guzzlers in the Preserve, but their anti-water stance has made it difficult to get permits to even haul water to existing systems. The policy is clearly impacting quail numbers and distribution significantly.

Around permanent water sources both south of Interstate 40 and north of Interstate 15, bird numbers are pretty good again this year with good hatches. At Halloran Spring, I saw a pair of Gambel’s quail that had over a dozen flying but small chicks in August. Those kinds of broods were the norm, which means coveys of 20 to 60 birds will be pretty common this season. The coveys are just going to be fewer and further apart than in the *good old days* because of the on-going Preserve-induced water crisis.

RED MOUNTAIN REGION

The Rand and El Paso mountain ranges in the Red Mountain region, along with the surrounding desert mountains from north of Barstow (Opal and Black Mountains) to the Trona region all saw much better chukar production and numbers are significantly above last year’s relatively poor season.

“They’ve bounced back pretty good this year,” said Tim Mahoney with the Ridgecrest Chapter of Quail Forever about chukar numbers. “It’s by far better than last year.”

Similar to the West Mojave, there appear to be many areas in this part of the desert with double hatches, but numbers are still recovering from very low cycles of birds so overall numbers may not be staggering like some double hatch years.

The same is true for quail numbers on the west side of Highway 14 and Highway 395 in this general region. The entire Scodie Mountain range (all the canyons on both sides of this range) had good production of valley quail, chukar, and mountain quail with no seeming late-rain dieoffs. Numbers of birds in canyons with functioning guzzlers or other year-around water sources should be very good this season.

OWENS VALLEY/EASTERN SIERRA

Further north into the Owens Valley, quail and chukar numbers are the best they’ve been in several seasons.



Matty Rawlinson with Owens Valley Wingshooting guide service in Bishop said it was an excellent production year.

“I’ve seen more mountain quail this year than I ever have — there’s three times as many this year as last year. It’s also going to be a bumper season for valley quail,” said Rawlinson.

For you blue or — more correctly — sooty grouse hunters, Rawlinson said it was also the best year for those mountain species than he’s seen in a long time.

“I’ve been finding a boat-load of blue grouse. Almost any day I could shoot a limit of blues, and I have places where you could shoot mountains, valleys, chukar, and grouse from where you park the truck.”

Rawlinson said there is also relatively light hunting pressure for upland birds around where he lives in Bishop. “There are probably 100 coveys of quail in the valley that have never been shot at.”

When I was scouting just out of Bishop in July, I saw two valley quail broods with over 12 chicks in each — and one had 18 chicks. Now that could have been a couple of hens’ production, but all of them were with one pair of adult birds that I saw.

COLORADO RIVER DESERT

For the third year in a row, the production of Gambel’s quail in the Colorado River Desert in Imperial County and along the Colorado River in Riverside and Imperial counties has been pretty good. Monsoon rains and enough winter rains have made the desert come back to life. Birds are now scattered across the desert again around permanent water sources — not just concentrated in areas around irrigated fields. While numbers are still down from historic levels, they are coming back.

John Rosenfeld, one of the founders of the new Friends of the Cibola National Wildlife Refuge, said the Gambel’s quail numbers look very good in the Colorado River corridor this year.

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"The desert is loaded again. There's quail everywhere," said Rosenfeld. "The coveys are 40 to 50 birds, finally big again, and I think we had three or four hatches this year."

Brian Holland, who owns Walter's Camp just across the river from Cibola, agrees with Rosenfeld's assessment.

"The resident covey of birds here in the camp is as big as I've ever seen it," said Holland. "During dove season, I saw *lots* of quail in the sand washes. It should be a pretty good year."

Holland did point out that most of the birds don't stray more than about three-quarter mile from a permanent water source, whether it is the Colorado River, irrigated fields, or desert springs and guzzlers.

He also had a tip:

"The mesquite trees have been packed with seed pods this year, and the quail love those seeds. If you find donkey shit — and we have a ton of burros down here — if you find donkey shit with mesquite seeds, camp on it because the quail are coming," said Holland laughing.

But he said the tip was valid. Holland said the quail pick through the poop to pick out the undigested seeds because it is easier than picking apart the pods themselves. He's seen coveys of bird congregating on the trails of burro poop this summer and early fall.

A little to the west, Rob Yates, with Desert Wildlife

Unlimited (the group that plants and maintains the dove fields in the Imperial Valley) was blunt in his assessment"

"The quail numbers are probably the best I've seen in almost 10 years. In August, I saw more quail in one day than I'd seen in three years," said Yates.

Then he laughed. "Now if no one shoots any this year and we get the same kind of hatches next year, we'll be able to shoot some next fall."

Yates said the numbers are still below the good numbers of the past, but "you can actually see some now."

"A guy who hunted hard and did some scouting could actually shoot a few birds this year," said Yates. "Last year, I saw more deer than I did quail, and I haven't shot a quail since — well — I think it was 2010, and we shot limits every time we went out. But I don't like hunting them until the coveys are 100 birds."

The Gambel's quail numbers are not back to that level yet, but the Colorado River desert is thriving again and with continued winter and monsoon rains, it will just keep getting better.

CARRIZO PLAIN REGION

Late spring rains really hammered chick numbers in the Carrizo Plain region, including the Temblor and Caliente mountain ranges, west of Bakersfield,

"All was looking great — then May arrived," said Dave Hardt, the former manager of the Kern National Wildlife refuge and an avid bird hunter in the Carrizo region. "We had some cold rain that began around the first week in May that continued until the middle of the month. It managed to wipe out most chicks that hatched from late April until around May 20th or slightly later."

"It was obvious during the brood surveys that we were missing an entire age class of chicks but quail are resilient birds and many of the pairs that lost chicks appear to have re-nested and pulled off some chicks, maybe not as many as were in the original clutches, but at least it wasn't a total loss," said Hardt.

Fortunately, this region had a fair hatch last year, which improved numbers. The year before was a good hatch, but bird numbers were so low in this region that the 2017 hatch resulted in just a below-average overall population. With the smaller late hatch this year, numbers continue to creep up.

Hardt said their brood surveys in the Temblors and Caliente's indicated overall decent production in quail, but production was not uniform.

"Overall I think hunters who know the area will find huntable numbers of quail in the areas that normally hold birds," said Hardt.

But then, isn't that is usually the story everywhere?

Non-lead ammunition is available most places

A quick check of retail outlets this week revealed that most retail outlets had at least some 12 and 20 gauge steel non-lead loads available in both sizes No. 6 and No. 7 shot. Many stores did not have other gauges.

Mike Etienne, vice-president at Turner's Outdoorsman, said that ammunition manufacturers have finally caught up with demand, and that good supplies of 12 and 20 gauge upland steel loads were available in all the Turner's outlets, and they had 28 and .410 upland loads in inventory and on the shelves at some stores. Stores without those sub-gauges could have it in hand in less than a week if requested by a customer.