

Western Birds

The
Wingshooter's
Newsletter



Special Edition

Revised & Updated

October, 2024

Everything you need to know about quail calling

Most quail hunters don't really know when and how to use a call during the hunting season or during pre-season scouting. Perhaps even worse, even fewer hunters realize how much fun quail calling can be, especially in the spring.

There is one common bit of knowledge that is well known: That "Chiquita" call you hear in the background of all ancient John Wayne movies is made by a quail.

Here's a simple, straightforward primer on the birds' calls, what they mean, and how and when you should use each type for hunting or scouting. Calls are essential quail hunting gear — even for hunters who use dogs.

There are three basic types of valley and Gambel's quail calls and a fourth you may hear occasionally.

RALLY CALL

The first and most useful call to imitate is the rally call. Think of it as the birds saying, "We're right here." Or it can mean the exact opposite, "Where is everyone?" What it means depends on how it is delivered. This is the famous three (sometimes four) note "Chiquita"



or "Chicago" call we've all heard.

This call is used infrequently throughout the morning when the birds have come off the roost and have spread out while feeding. It is primarily used in late spring and throughout the summer and early fall. The dominate birds in the covey will make this call, just to let everyone else in the group (and nearby coveys) know where he or she is located, and it serves to let the other birds know the direction the covey is moving. Both males and females make this call.

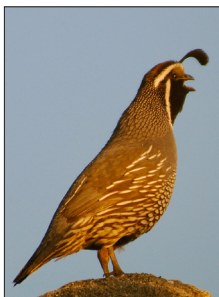
The birds use this call less as young birds age and learn the travel routine. By late

winter and through early spring, you might only hear one or two rally calls during a short window of time in the mornings or right at dusk as the birds go to roost.

In summer and through the fall when you (or a predator) flush a covey of birds, they frequently scatter in all directions, and within a few minutes, the first birds will start giving the rally call. Soon, the calls will
(Continued on Page 3, See *Quail Calling*....)

Commentary

Stealth and scouting



I like to tell the story of a long-time hunting friend who wanted to tag along when I was scouting a new spot for this newsletter. I eased up to the edge of a broad desert wash in the truck and got out quietly, leaving my door open, and made sure I had a call in my pocket. My buddy jumped out, slammed his door, let the dog out of the back seat and barked a loud command when the Labrador shot off into the desert. Then his dog whistle was tooting. I glared at him and got back in the truck.

"Why didn't you blow the call?" he asked as we eased on down the dirt track.

I explained to my friend that quail aren't stupid. Once he announced our presence on the side of the road, do you think they would have answered a call coming from the exact same spot? No! They would all be looking at each other, quietly saying to each other, "Don't answer. No one answer. We don't want that stupid bird calling right next to the humans in our covey. We don't need those genetics." If had called — and kept calling — they would have figured out I was making like a mockingbird and imitating their calls.

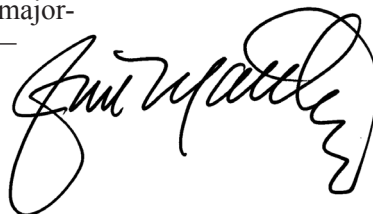
The goal in scouting is to find birds, not educate the young ones on our behavior. The older, hunted birds already start running away from the road when they see or hear a vehicle, even in July. The young birds will get educated quickly enough once the season opens, we don't need to start that process while we are scouting.

So I scout and call stealthily: I drive slowly and as quietly as possible when I'm in quail habitat. I don't have the radio blaring or talk and laugh with a scouting partner. I'm spending most of my time looking at the sides of the road for tracks and looking for birds. If birds run across the road. I stop and turn off the engine and try not to panic them, letting them move off at their own pace. I use the time to count birds, mark the spot on my maps, or save the GPS coordinate.

When I don't see birds, I will frequently stop the truck in likely bird spots, get out quietly, and listen for at least five or 10 minutes. Then I use a call and listen for answers, making notes on my maps on what I hear and see. When I leave the spot, I leave quietly.

I explain to people who come to my public land bird hunting seminars that I can put everything I know about quail hunting onto a three-by-five card, a Cliff Notes version of what I have been taught by mentors and veteran hunters, and learned on my own, over those 50 years. Most quail hunters know most of the information on the card by heart, learning it the same way I did. And, if we are honest about it, it's not rocket science. Once you learn a few basics, you will be able to find birds consistently.

I am always amazed, however, that the vast majority of hunters — even those who carry a call — use their calls incorrectly or too often much of the time. A lot of hunters who use dogs, otherwise excellent hunters, don't even carry a call. This special free issue of *Western Birds* is an attempt to help remedy that problem.



Western Birds

The Wingshooter's Newsletter

This is a special edition of *Western Birds* on hunting tactics. We don't do these very often. Regular readers know that this publication is a dedicated, where-to-go, public lands scouting report with maps, GPS coordinates of hot spots with guzzler and spring locations, and up-to-date information on where hunting is best. It is basically what your best hunting buddy would provide — if he were a good friend, a *great* friend.

A "one year" subscription is six, eight-page issues. By "one year" I mean you receive six issues as I get the scouting done. I used to do six per year, but I'm getting old and most years I don't meet that schedule any longer. I do promise, however, that you will get at least 48 pages of newsletter for each "year" of your subscription. 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 issue e-mail editions for the dove and upland openers, and other updates like this one. So make sure we have an e-mail address where we can reach you.

Editor:

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

E-Mail addresses:

odwriter@verizon.net
chukarinsane@gmail.com

Web Site:

www.OutdoorNewsService.com

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/pages/Western-Birds/128544773832003

Mailing Address:

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

Quail calling....

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be coming from many of the scattered quail. If you pay attention, you will notice two things about the calls in this situation. First, there can be two distinct tempos to the calls — with some birds making a slower, soothing call, and the others a nervous, fast-paced call. The slower call is usually the mature bird telling the young birds its location. It's almost like it is saying, "Calm down, I'm right here." While the nervous call is usually a young bird calling out, "I'm alone here — where is everyone." As young birds mature, they will call less and the mature birds will answer less.

By winter, the birds in the covey have learned how to escape predators, and one of those ways is not to give their location away by calling. The coveys have places in their home range where the young birds have learned to rendezvous without calling, or after hearing a single call and knowing the direction that bird is heading. But during summer and at least through early fall, young birds still get nervous when away from the covey and calling is far more frequent.

A hunting buddy called a pair of young Gambel's quail right to him under the mesquite tree where he had sat down after spooking some birds while scouting. He heard some young birds make a panicked rally call not long after the covey flush, so he answered with a calming dominate bird call as he sat under the tree. Almost immediately he saw the two young birds running zig-zag down the wash toward him from cover patch to cover patch. They stopped under a palo verde 30 yards away, so he called again. Since he was dressed in camouflage, the two young birds soon were under the tree where he was sitting looking around for the other quail. One actually hopped up onto the toe of his boot as he sat there with his legs outstretched, getting a little elevation while looking intently around for its family.

While the rally call is primarily used to locate birds, quail will come to the call, especially in the summer and early fall. But birds will almost always answer the rally call because they are very social and vocal.

The big mistake most hunters make when using this call is calling way too frequently. If you don't hear a response within a minute or two after your first call, you can call a second time. But don't keep tooting away if you don't hear answers. You have either spooked the birds already (and now educating them on "human" quail calls) or no birds are nearby.

You also don't want to call during the heat of the day. The birds mostly call in the mornings. Once it becomes hot, they usually are all sitting together as a covey in the shade somewhere. When they hear a call then, they probably look at each other and wonder what crazy bird is out in the sun in this heat. I can almost hear them whispering to each other, "Don't answer, we don't need dumb-bird genetics in our covey."

There are slight differences between the valley and Gambel's quail rally calls, but they are so recognizable that you are unlikely to confuse them with anything else. (OK, that's not entirely true. Mockingbirds that live around quail will frequently do amazing imitations of this call, but it is usually followed immediately with other calls that make up the fabric of mockingbird calls. You will probably only be fooled momentarily.) The valley quail usually makes a three-note call — Chi-Ca-go — while the Gambel's quail kind of doubles or stutters on the middle note — Chi-Ca-ca go. The key is to imitate the birds where you are hunting as closely as possible.

SPRING CALL

The second call to learn for both species is the one that is fun to use in the spring. It is the single note "cow" or presentation call the males use to attract females in the spring mating/nesting season. This call also serves as a warning to other males to keep their distance. It is a single exclamatory note that trails off at the end: Kerrrrr. It is then repeated a few long seconds later. It can be repeated one or two more times. Then the sequence is repeated from a few seconds to a minute later. It is also made in response to other males calling from a distance and may not be made again until the bird hears another bird call in response.

Male quail battle with each other for dominance in the spring just like turkeys (which are closely related). Males set up home ranges and try to lure females to them, and they will fight with other males for the best spots. This is my favorite time of year to call quail because the males will frequently run (or fly) right to you, strutting purposefully around, neck bowed and feathers ruffled, ready to fight the intruding male.

The less dominant males distribute themselves throughout a covey's core home range trying to lure the hens away from the dominant birds. They are usually within earshot of each other, and mature males will frequently test each other and repeat battles for dominance. The young males get dispersed out even further, but they still are in the covey's home range.

For hunters, calling and scouting in the spring can (Continued on Page 4, See *Quail Calling....*)

Tactics



Quail calling....

(Continued from Page 3)

tell us a lot about where a covey lives. In my seminars, I always tell the same story about spring calling and following my ears to young males located further and further away from the core of the covey near a water source. The calling led me over a brushy ridge, across a small canyon and onto a saddle I likely never would have explored during the hunting season. But the bench held a couple of young males calling their hearts out all those springs ago. The spot was more than a half-mile from where I normally quit hunting that covey in the fall. I filed the spot away in my mind.

This particular covey of quail is located in a heavily hunted part of Cajon Pass, and what I discovered by calling and scouting in the spring was where this particular covey retreats when it gets a lot of hunting pressure once the season opens. When everyone else is saying the birds are *all shot out*, I make the hike to my secret bench. I have shot birds on this spot a lot over the years — a spot I discovered in the spring by following the calls of young males.

CONTACT CALL

The third call you hear frequently, but only when you are close to the birds, is the contact call. Most people only hear this call given in rapid sequences when they are close to the birds before they flush. So most think it is an alarm call. In valley quail it is a rapid, “*chit-chit-chit*,” while in Gambel’s quail it is throaty, almost purring, “*urht-urht-urht*” call.

The reality is this is the birds’ close-quarter contact call *and* an alarm call. They use it all the time when they are moving and feeding in an area. The tempo is much slower when they are not panicked, and it is a happy noise they make to be sure other covey members are nearby. If they hear the call increase in tempo and nervousness, it means danger is near and flushing is eminent. If they cease making the call, it usually means there is danger and they are going to sit tightly and wait out the danger. This call is best imitated by making the sharp ticking sound with your mouth for valley quail,

while making the Gambel’s quail is more problematic, at least for me.

THE PUTT

The final call you will hear on occasion is an angry “putt,” to use turkey language parlance. It is more like a loud contact-type call or the first note of the rally call that has a nasally, cough-like sound. The bird sounds annoyed. Males and females use it, especially in the spring, to show their displeasure with another quail or predator that has entered territory where it doesn’t belong. This is a tough one to imitate, and really doesn’t serve a hunting purpose.

THE FLUSH CALL

The last call I use in the field when hunting is what I call “the flush.” It is the noise birds’ wings make then they are flushing. When quail hear other birds flushing, it frequently will lead them to flush. I make this call with my mouth, trilling my tongue against the back of my teeth while exhaling hard. I use it when trying to get tight-holding birds to flush for a shot. It works very well early in the season, but gets less and less effective as the season progresses and young birds feel secure holding in a safe location, regardless of what other birds might be doing.

NOTES ON MOUNTAIN QUAIL

Mountain quail have a similar repertoire of calls, but their voice is far more musical and whistle-like. You will need a completely different call for mountain quail. Some hunters use pintail or wigeon whistles to make a passable imitation of the lovely “*quee-ARK*” call, and some mountain quail-specific calls are available. The repeated, single-note whistle/song can be done with those calls — and if you are good mouth whistler.

PRACTICE

Lastly, the key to becoming a competent quail caller is practice. A quail call is really a small musical instrument, and while practicing it helps to have real bird accompaniment. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology website (www.allaboutbirds.org) is a great place to listen to quail sounds and begin practicing your quail calling by imitating these sounds. The Xeno-Canto (www.xeno-canto.org) website has an even greater selection of recordings that allow you to hear and imitate even more variations.

How to make a quail call

A clothespin quail call is simple to make and accurately imitates the calls of both California valley quail and Gambel's quail. All you need to make this call is a wooden clothespin, electrical tape, and a No. 30, 31, or 32 rubber band. These rubber bands are 1/8th of an inch wide and approximately 1/16th of an inch thick. A No. 31 measures about 2 3/4-inches long when squashed flat on a ruler and is the best size for most clothes pins.

Step 1: Take out the metal piece of the clothespin so you have two pieces of wood.

Step 2: Take one of the pieces of wood and make three or four wraps of black electrical tape around the fat end of the wood. The call works best if you cover the slot where the metal piece was attached.

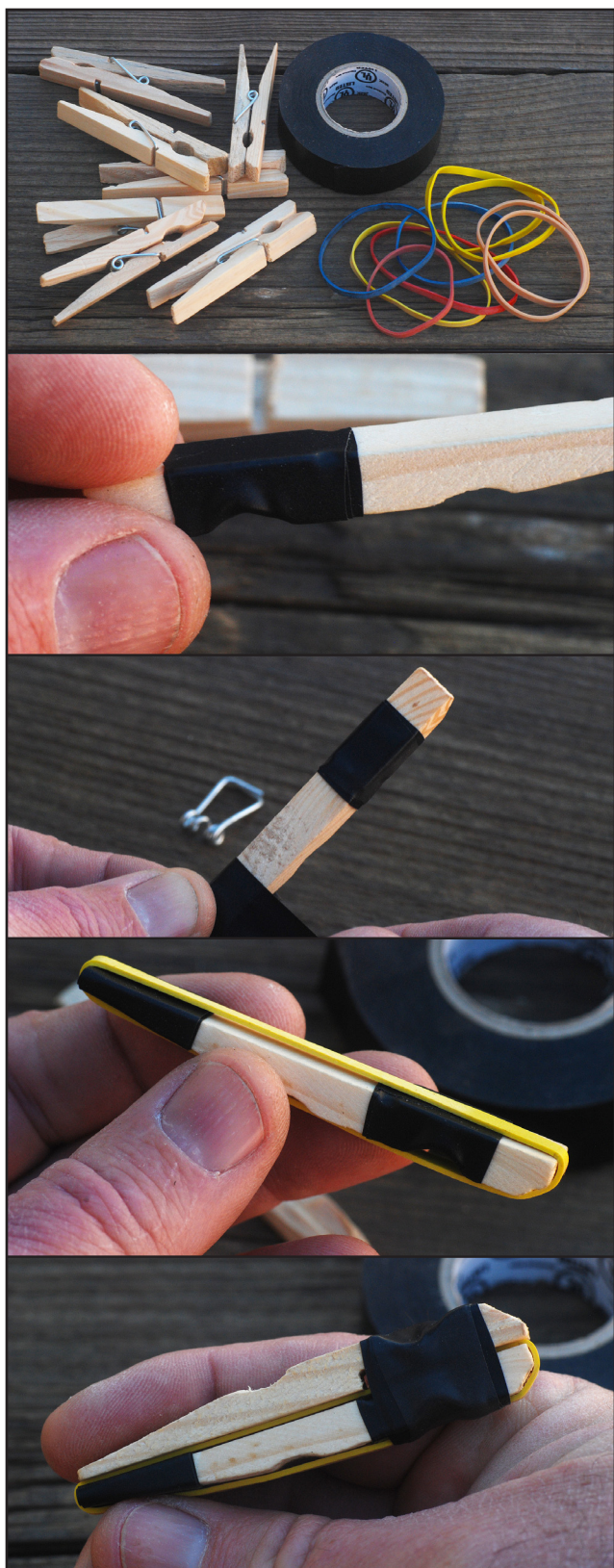
Step 3: Take four wraps of electrical tape around the skinny end of the same piece of wood. Make sure the tape is smooth on the flat side of the wood as you wrap the tape on. The beauty of electrical tape is that it's pretty stretchy and makes this easy.

Step 4: Take the rubber band and place it around the taped wood length-wise. Make sure the rubber band is centered along the flat side of the wood. With a rubber band that is too long for the wood, you may end up with a loop on the outside of the call.

Step 5: Take the other piece of wood and place the flat side of this wood against the flat side of the taped piece of wood so the rubber band is trapped between the two flat pieces of clothespin. Now pinch the two pieces of wood together and tightly tape them together at one end. I like to keep the two fat ends of the wood together for this process. Try to keep the flat insides of the two pieces of wood parallel to each other. The call is effectively done at this point.

Step 6: Blow through the slit between the two pieces across the rubber band. You can tune the call by applying different pressure with your fingers to the un-taped end of the call. You can leave the call this way or tape the skinny end of the call together once you determine the correct pressure for the sound you like, effectively locking it in at this pitch. The tighter you pinch the call, the higher the pitch.

The rubber band functions as the reed and makes a very life-like imitation of the quail. Don't expect perfection with your first call. Make several. You will get the hang of it quickly. Some of these calls sound really outstanding. The beauty of this call is that you can make about 50 of them for less than \$5, so replacements are very cheap. This is a great kids' project.



Gear

What are your options for a quail call?

There are a number of “rubber band” quail calls on the market to mimic valley and Gambel’s quail (and which will do passable jobs on scaled quail), and no Western quail hunter should ever be in the field without a couple.

The two most common calls are an orange plastic version made by Primos and a smaller wooden call made by Lohman. Both cost \$15 to \$25. Many (most?) of the Primos calls are difficult to make sound like quail, but the Lohman call is good. The rubber band is difficult to change on both of these calls, but it can be done.

Chris Johnson, a young Southern California hunter, makes a nice line of calls on 3D-printers. He has three models, and they all have very good sounds. They are also reasonably priced (under \$50), and a very good value. You can reach him via Instagram here: <http://www.instagram.com/cjquailcalls/>.

You can also make your own out of wooden clothes pins, black electrical tape, and rubber bands. (See page 5 for detailed directions on how to do this.) They will cost you about \$10 per hundred, and they can make a very good sound with a little tweaking.

You might also be able to find one of the rosewood Iverson quail calls for sale used, but they are no longer made. I have seen them sell for \$100 or more, but most sell for \$60 to \$80. They have a lifelike sound.

The *Jim Matthews Signature Calls* I make are available in a variety of configurations and in limited



The quail calls above are (from left to right): Two Jim Matthews Signature Calls, both with internal sound chambers, a CJ's Quail Call, a rosewood Iverson call (no longer made), a Primos Mountain Quail Call, and a Jim Matthews Signature mountain quail call. In the foreground are Lohman (left) and Primos (right) rubber band calls. All can be effective.

numbers. Most are made to order, and all are signed and dated on the inside of the call in the valley/Gambel’s quail versions. They start at \$80 and go up to \$200-plus, depending on the different features in the call.

I make two basic types of calls for valley and Gambel’s quail, which will work for scaled quail when used by a good caller. The first is what I call a semi-production “stick call,” which is like the original Iverson call and all other calls fall into this category. The second is a “chamber call,” which has a sound chamber cut into the inside of the call to give the sound more resonance and timber (the photo on the left shows the chamber in this call). I think chamber calls have the best sound of any call I’ve ever used.

I also make mountain quail calls or whistles (that also make nice pintail whistles), and I have added a line of bobwhite quail whistles to the line-up.

All of my calls may be made from a variety of woods, tuned for specific birds, and in different sizes. Some calls are made with leather lanyards, and I also offer shotgun shell heads inset into the face of the call.

For information on my calls, you can link to the Quail Calls page on my website at <http://www.outdoornewsservice.com/quail-calls>, my Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/Jim-Matthews-Signature-Quail-Calls-1344787495626861/> or my Instagram page at <http://www.instagram.com/jim.matthews.33/>.

