

BLUE QUAIL... Best in the West

They may lack the bobwhite's class or the ringneck's beauty, but for sheer excitement the "cottontop" is hard to beat!

By John Wootters

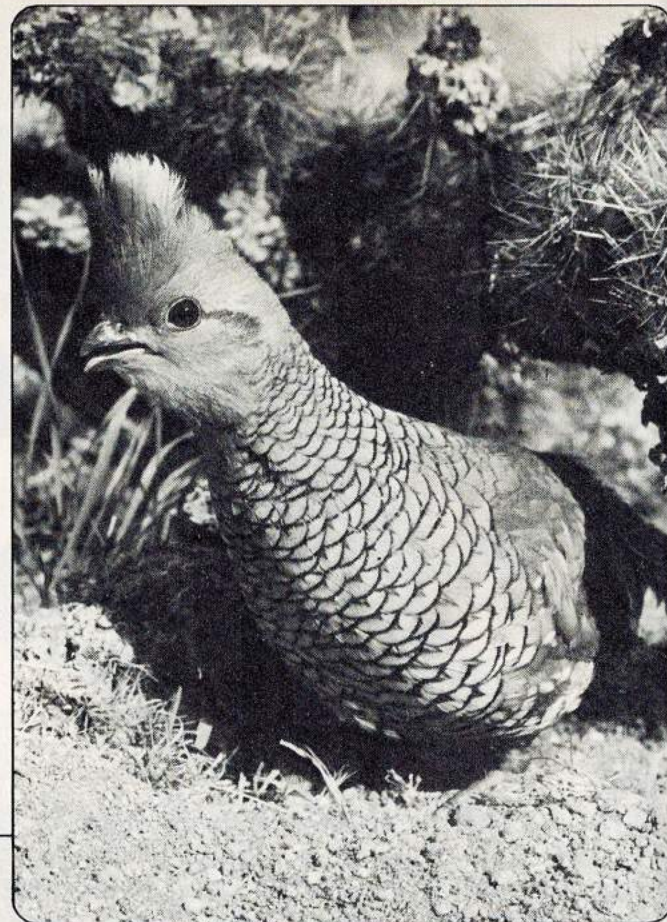
My wife says I'm a little paranoid about blue quail, but that's ridiculous. If it were true, I would suspect that blue quail conspire against me, my dignity, and my sanity, but I harbor no such suspicion. On the contrary, I know positively that I am the intended victim of a blue quail conspiracy! What's so paranoid about that?

My problem, you see, is that I was a bobwhite quail hunter before I ever made the acquaintance of *Callipepla squamata*, usually called scaled quail, blue quail, cottontop, or "those G#@D*&MX little blue sumbitches!" by hunters. That is the wrong way to go. The bobwhite is a bird of culture and refinement, a true sporting gentleman with whom the relationship with a hunter is almost a partnership. The blue quail, by contrast, is nobody's gentleman; it's a tough, catch-as-catch-can, any-thing-goes street brawler that will take unfair advantage of you every time and any way it can.

It got that way by evolving in a tough, hard environment. Its range includes the western half of Texas, the Oklahoma Panhandle, the southwestern corner of Kansas, the southeastern corner of Colorado, all of New Mexico, eastern Arizona, and about the northern half of Old Mexico, excluding both coasts. It is mostly a country of arid, even semi-desert, conditions without forests. A diversity of thornbrush, cactus, and yucca shelters the continent's greatest populations and assortment of predators, and our quail became what it is by dodging phalanxes of foxes, coyotes, bobcats, raccoons, skunks, ring-tails, rattlesnakes, hawks, owls, eagles, and many more, and doing it in country typically without much, if any, ground

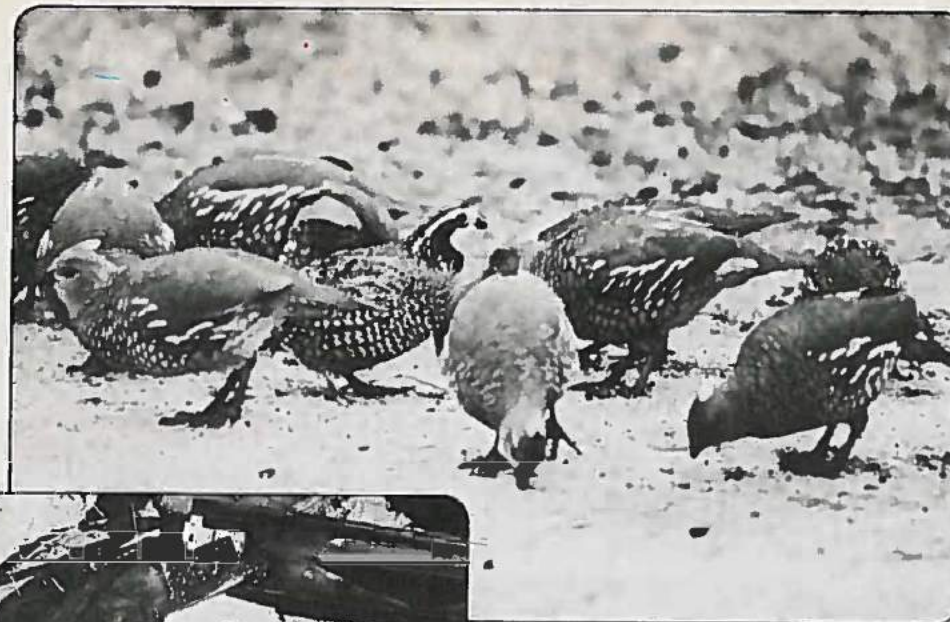


Hunting blue quail means plenty of exercise and plenty of thorny cactus! While a very few well-tempered bird dogs are good on blues, Wootters feels one usually does better without dogs. The best method is to spot a covey, then charge in for a flush.



Photograph by Len Rue, Jr.

Photograph by Russell Tinsley



In years of good bobwhite hatches, it's not unusual to see mixed coveys of blues and bobwhite, above. Author prefers a light-weight 20-gauge because of the walking this hunting entails, but recommends modified choke and high-velocity shotshells.

cover. Although it needs open water like all quail, it survives prolonged droughts much better than the bobwhites that share much of its range. Two years ago, my ranch on the Mexican border was alive with quail of both species, about equally divided between bobwhites and

out that these little blue demons are simply not going to behave themselves and stay put for a classic point, and will learn to herd them, even to circle a covey and take them by surprise. The birds may then be confused enough to squat just long enough for the guns to get within range if they run fast enough.

A dog like that is worth much fine gold in my part of the world and is pampered and fawned over and brought his pipe and slippers every evening in the kennel, and introduced to nubile young girl dogs at every opportunity in hopes of perpetuating the instinct for working blue quail. Sadly, it seems not to be an inheritable ability, and the puppies—however good they may be on bobwhites—usually go batty just as quickly as any other when confronted with blue quail.

I have known a number of excellent bobwhite dogs, in fact, which were never the same again after exposure to blues, and were virtually ruined even for the more civilized bob. Blue quail demand a strong-minded dog that thinks for itself; in the absence of such a paragon, one is better off by far with no dog at all, or perhaps with only a good golden or Lab for retrieving, who will stay close to heel and away from large, rusty-backed rattlesnakes which constitute another hazard.

Scaled quail are, of course, famous runners. Blue-quail hunting perhaps should be considered for inclusion on the

agenda of Olympic events. The preferred technique is to locate a covey within 100 yards or so (that alone will sound alien to your typical bobwhite hunter), and to sneak as close as possible before launching an all-out charge, hoping to close the range to 30 yards or less and to panic the birds into flight. Strolling won't get it; you can stroll along behind a covey, catching glimpses from time to time of little blue figures darting through the brush ahead for eight miles and never get a wingshot. You have to crowd the birds to get them up at all, and it isn't easy to crowd something that can outrun you in typical cottontop cover. In open country, you haven't got a chance. Scaled quail have eyes that would send a red-tailed hawk to an optometrist for contact lenses, and even if you're capable of a 4.4-second 40-yard dash in hunting boots with a shotgun at high port arms, you ain't gonna be within range when they flush, if they flush, in open country. Forget it.

Even there, your troubles are not exactly over. Blues do not have the noisy, explosive flush of the bobwhite; instead, they tend to get up raggedly, sometimes one at a time, with soft whirring of wings that's easy to miss on a windy day. This gives them an extra second or two head start before you realize that a bird has taken wing.

Blues are strong flyers (I have seen them buzzing along 150 feet in the air

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blues. After a period of nine months without a drop of rain, the bobs were decimated, almost wiped out. The blue quail population was also reduced, but today you will see at least 20 blues for every bobwhite. The blue quail is tough and hardy, a true survivor, and it survives as successfully in the face of gunfire as in drought, famine, and predators.

In the unusual season in which rains have produced a little ground cover of grass and forbs, the blue quail is quite as good at hiding as its bobwhite cousin, and coveys may hold under these conditions about as well as bobs, but only until flushed and shot up *once*. As the season progresses and more and more coveys have been found by hunters, the birds get wilder and wilder until, as a quail-hunting friend of mine once disgustedly noted, "by the end of the season you could enter the property, slam the front gate, and every covey on 11,000 acres would get up at once!"

Under more normal conditions, when the ground between clumps of brush is mostly bare, blue quail won't hold even on opening day. On the average, they require only about two days to drive a good bobwhite dog totally batty. Now and then an exceptionally bright dog will figure

with such determination that I thought they might be headed south for the winter, but they rarely pit themselves against the gun in a strong straightaway like a bobwhite. Instead, they major in tricky maneuvers in the heavy brush. No grouse or timberdoodle that ever flapped a wing was any better at interposing vegetation between itself and a charge of shot. A blue quail has a nasty little trick of flushing strongly and then "dying" as it tops the nearest brush, to flutter down like a crippled butterfly and leg it off to the west like a Watusi marathon man with a lion one jump behind him.

Some years ago, I had the pleasure of introducing two very famous firearms writers and editors to the joys of south Texas blue-quail hunting. Believe me, both of these gents can *shoot*; one of them is one of the very few men ever to get his name on a brass plaque in the Remington Farms clubhouse for a "straight" at the Crazy Quail claybird game. In two glorious days of blue-quail hunting, however, the two of them shot the top out of every mesquite tree and prickly pear cactus on 13,000 acres and never touched a feather! By chance, I was having a run of luck with a shotgun at the time, and limited daily. It was the most fun I can imagine having, given all-male companionship, in Webb County, Texas!

If blue quail can't outrun you, or dive
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behind a bush just as you touch the trigger, they still will not exactly come out with their hands up. In addition to their sprinting prowess, they are formidable sneakers. You start off down a slope after a sighted covey at a brisk trot, and, suddenly, after 100 yards, there are no birds in front of you, and none have flown. What happened is that they hooked a hard left behind a blackbrush shrub about the time they saw you coming. Knowing this, from bitter experience, you return on a parallel course about 20 yards on one side or the other of your original line of advance. Statisticians say you have a 50-50 chance of picking the correct side to get back into the covey, but any old thorn-scarred blue-quail hunter can tell you your chances range somewhere between none and none whatsoever.

Hunters who cut their teeth on one of the other species of galloping quail—Gambel's, California valley, mountain, etc.—will be quite prepared for the scaled quail's running, but, believe me, none of those other birds are as proficient at this vanishing act. It is a blue-quail patent.

It also happens when you get lucky and get a pellet or two into a cottontop and bring it down crippled. Without a good retriever, you'll lose nine out of 10 such birds, and it is of real importance that you put your blues on the ground stone dead. Considering all, it may not be surprising that many veteran blue-quail hunters use modified chokes and heavy loads of $7\frac{1}{2}$ shot. Blues are tougher than bobs, harder to knock out of the air, and much harder to take cleanly, plus shots are often longer. My own preference is for a double gun, bored improved cylinder and modified, chambered in 20 gauge and loaded with Federal Premium high-velocity 8s. The instant selection of chokes is invaluable on cottontops, and those hardened, copper-plated pellets in the Premium ammunition cold-cock blues in the air perceptibly better than any other loads I've tried in 20 years of chasing the little buggers. Patterns are spectacularly dense, if not quite as wide as those of conventional shot in the same barrels, and seem simply to freeze a well-centered bird in mid-wingbeat. That's what you want with blues.

If it isn't finished when it hits the ground, a blue quail will run off if it can, and if it can't run, it'll crawl into the thickest, thorniest clump it can find, or into a rabbit hole. Poking around in the brush after such a bird can be downright exciting, too, as I discovered once when, as I cautiously worked my arm down through a cactus bush to reach for an expired blue, a five-foot rattlesnake which I hadn't seen socked the still-warm carcass when my hand was about 10 inches from it!

Another handy piece of equipment to have in most scaled-quail country is a suit of armor. When you make your charge at a running covey, there's no time to be ducking and dodging thornbrush. If you go *around* a cactus clump while the birds dart *through* it, you're lost before you start. An ordinary pair of so-called "brush pants" may be just fine for brier patches in bobwhite coverts, but a prickly-pear spine will go through them like a whaling harpoon through a lady's silken kerchief.

Over the years I have accumulated a sort of blue-quail hunting costume which has spared my tender epidermis most—but not all—such punctures. Besides boots, I wear a pair of heavy horsehide rider's chaps, a buckskin shirt, and a pair of javelina-hide gloves. Thus armored, I by golly go where the birds go, running over and through thorny, spiny, sticky stuff that would make an armadillo cringe! I'm told it's quite a spectacle to see me burst through a cactus bush with prickly-pear pads and other debris flying in all directions in a cloud of dust, whooping like a Comanche with an arrow in his rear end and blazing away in all directions at terrified blue quail. However that may be, it works. The birds just can't stand it, and I get my shots on the wing. If I tried it in ordinary hunting garments, I'd be hurt worse than the dead quail after such a foray! I admit that it does seem to unnerve my uninitiated companions almost as severely as the quail, but that's their problem, not mine. I'm sorry about the dog of a friend of mine, however; he was a sensitive, high-strung pointer who, after my first bulldozing demonstration, turned and trotted back the car, refusing to hunt anywhere near me for the rest of the day.

If I have made hunting the scaled quail sound like an unrewarding and somewhat masochistic pastime, I'm even sorrier. Unrewarding it sometimes is, in terms of birds in the bag, and strenuous and occasionally painful it always is, but for sheer, uninhibited, red-necked *fun* I know of no hunting sport to match it. It's a far cry from the mannered, almost ritualistic quail hunting on Southern bobwhite plantations, for sure. It's a fast, boisterous sport with few rules and no holds barred. In good years, in good country, blue quail are so plentiful that 20 or 30 coveys a day, even without a dog, are not unusual.

At the end of such a day, a hunter will be worn out, scratched, footsore, punctured, sunburned, and maybe frustrated, but it will have been a day to be remembered.

When I hear the cottontop's "cheek-churrrr, cheek-chuurr!" covey call in the thornbrush, I tremble like my friend's high-strung pointer. I'm glad there are blue quail in the Southwest.

Cottontops are the best in the West, and you earn every bird you get. What more could a hunter ask?

