

Outdoors

Pint-sized pirates of the prairies

The bobwhite quail is a gentleman. He's polite; he goes by the rules and plays fair.

The scaled quail (AKA "blue quail" or "cottontop") of south Texas doesn't know the word "fair;" his keyword is "survive," and he'll do anything to accomplish that.

He's fast and sneaky, and plays dirty. He'll drive a good pointing dog trained on bobwhites totally batty and make the dog's owner use language his wife probably doesn't even know he knows.

The blue quail is the buccaneer of the brushlands, a five-inch-tall swashbuckler who seems to delight in making fools of hunters.

I love him.

Blues are running quail, so those who hunt them are, necessarily, runners, too. The South Texas habitat rarely offers enough ground cover for a quail to hold in, so they tend to keep moving in front of a pointing dog ... stop-and-go is their motto. I've seen only a few dogs (mostly German breeds) that could figure out how to circle in front of a running covey and pin it, even briefly, for the runnin' guns to catch up.

Blue quail hunting without a dog is excellent exercise.

You have to push them hard to make them fly at all, and then it's tough to be in range when they do take wing. Typically, they gain just enough altitude to barely top over the ever-present thornbrush and then slant steeply to the ground. That's why the bushes on a hard-hunted blue quail lease never get any taller; hunters keep them pruned with charges of #7-1/2 shot hurled at cottontops disappearing over them.

And you probably need not be told that when their little feet hit the dirt, their little legs are going about 40 miles per hour.

Another result of these birds' underhanded tactics, besides getting the hunters into Olympic condition, is a degree of frustration that often leads to — oh, shame! dare I say it? — ground-sluicing! Most folks might be astounded at how hard it is to hit a running blue quail with a

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shotgun.

Don't ask me how I know that.

Bobwhites and blue quail can coexist in good years on the same lands, but in dry (normal) years, the blues predominate. They're much tougher and more resilient than their gentlemanly cousins. Even the worst drought never completely wipes them out, and they can recover to huntable populations very quickly when range conditions improve.

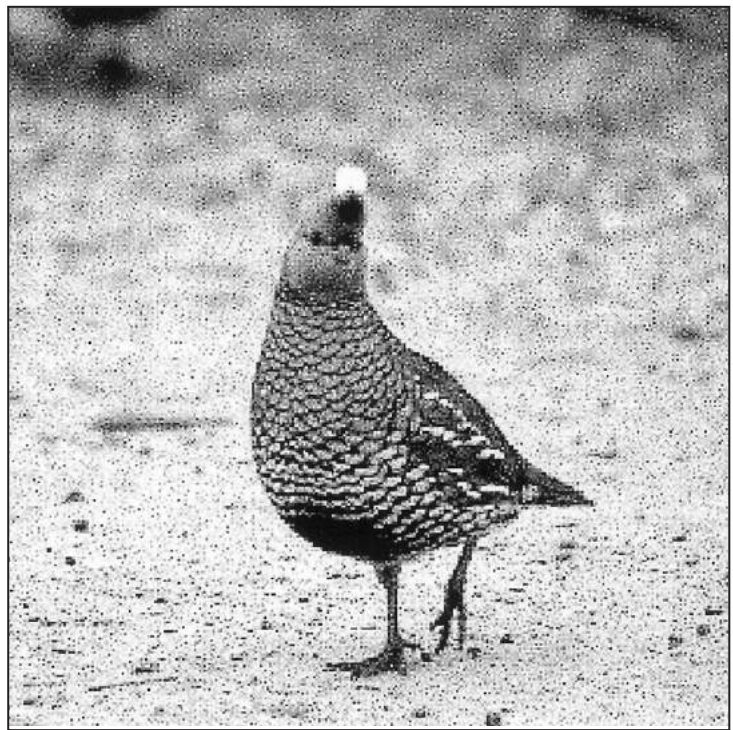
These little birds live surrounded by predators: bobcats, coyotes, badgers, jaguarundis, ocelots, margay cats, rattlesnakes, bullsnares, whipsnakes, rat snakes, hawks by day and owls by night. All relish a tasty quail dinner just as much as humans with shotguns.

But for all that, the dry thornbrush still rings with the "chip-chrrrrr!" gathering call of the blue quail.

Blue quail inhabit parts of Texas, Mexico, New Mexico, Colorado and Oklahoma, but the form found along the Mexican border of Texas is distinctive, wearing a unique marking, a reddish-brown patch on the belly, found on quail of no other population. This badge gives it the official name of "chestnut-bellied scaled quail." Next time you shoot a Texas cottontop, turn it over and notice that even Texan quail are exceptional.

One year I got tired of running into cactus and thornbrush while chasing blue quail, and decided that no little pea-brained bird was going to get the best of me! I'd show 'em!

Like a knight preparing for a tourney, I armored myself, donning high boots, a pair of thick horsehide chaps, a tough buckskin shirt, and javelina-hide gloves. Then I charged the quail, yelling like a madman while crashing headlong into the thornbrush, sending prickly-pear pads flying, and ignoring the stick-



John Wootters photo

Here swaggers the cause of all the author's frustrations, the cotton-topped buccaneer of the brushlands, the South Texas chestnut-bellied scaled quail. He humbles hunters, defies dogs, and makes every other upland game bird in Texas look like a sissy. If you think I exaggerate, you haven't hunted him.

ers. It worked — but there were unforeseen consequences.

I flushed the startled birds and got some close shots, but I also spooked the bird dogs that had never seen such an apparition as me charging insanely through the brush. They refused to come near me and would not retrieve to my hand, so I mostly had to pick up my own birds.

Having a large western diamondback rattlesnake strike a dying quail in a thicket just as I was reaching for it, however, occasioned a tactical reappraisal.

My headlong, hell-for-leather approach did have some advantages, but was not without a downside or two, not the least of which was several hours spent extracting thousands of cactus spines embedded in my leather armor. Years later, some were still working their way through the leather to stab me unexpectedly in tender places.

had the last laugh. I can just hear the little pirates chortling as they zip through the brush, screaming "chip-chrrrrr!" and probably making obscene gestures with the middle feathers of their wingtips.

Blues put the sport into "sport hunting." Long may they run!

John Wootters, of Ingram, is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.