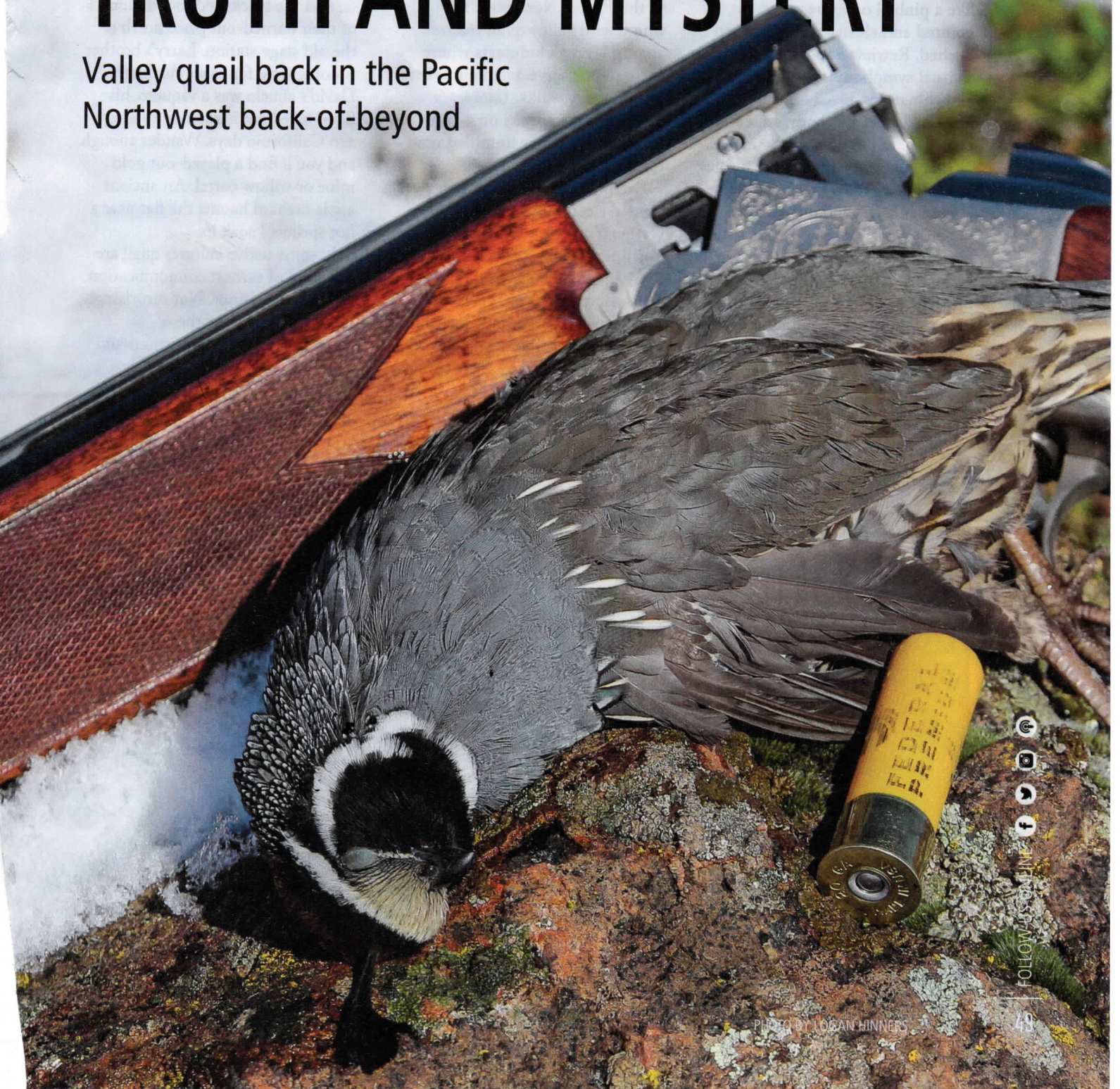


BY SCOTT LINDEN

# LEGEND AND MYTH, TRUTH AND MYSTERY

Valley quail back in the Pacific  
Northwest back-of-beyond



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PHOTO BY LOGAN HINNERS



**D**iminutive in stature, valley quail occupy an outsized place in many upland hunters' hearts. Valley quail are also a dichotomy: animated lawn ornaments yet denizens of austere, wild landscapes.

Taunting you from a fencepost with their come-hither call, they are both wary and stealthy, darting like a pinball on espresso when pointed and elusive in flight when flushed. Retrieved to hand, they are a visual symphony: white eyebrow and chinstraps, black bib and head, gray-buff-chestnut body, scaled breast and a topknot on the males.

They could be assembled of surplus parts from a gamebird warehouse.

Bucket listers and duffers alike prize them. Is it because these gaudy birds inhabit such wild places? Or because they jink among the sage brush like an F-18 taking flak? Or because they make a pointing dog look so good ... sometimes? The answer is yes.

Valley (or California) quail love old farm machinery and the leavings of man. They thrive in suburbs and on the edges of civilization. But for public-access quail hunting, head for the back of beyond.

#### WHY WE GO

The sere, unpopulated corners of the Pacific Northwest are where wild valley quail *chirrup* among lava-rock deserts where petroglyphs serve as mile markers for long, dry walks. *Callipepla californica* are specks on a vast landscape that has humbled man for thousands of years.

Earthquakes and volcanoes created steep canyons that induce vertigo if you stop to marvel. You'll find Milky Way vistas and thousand-mile looks from high spots. Rotting wagon wheels and rock teepee rings recall wilder times. You are farther from a hospital (and a Starbucks) than anywhere in the

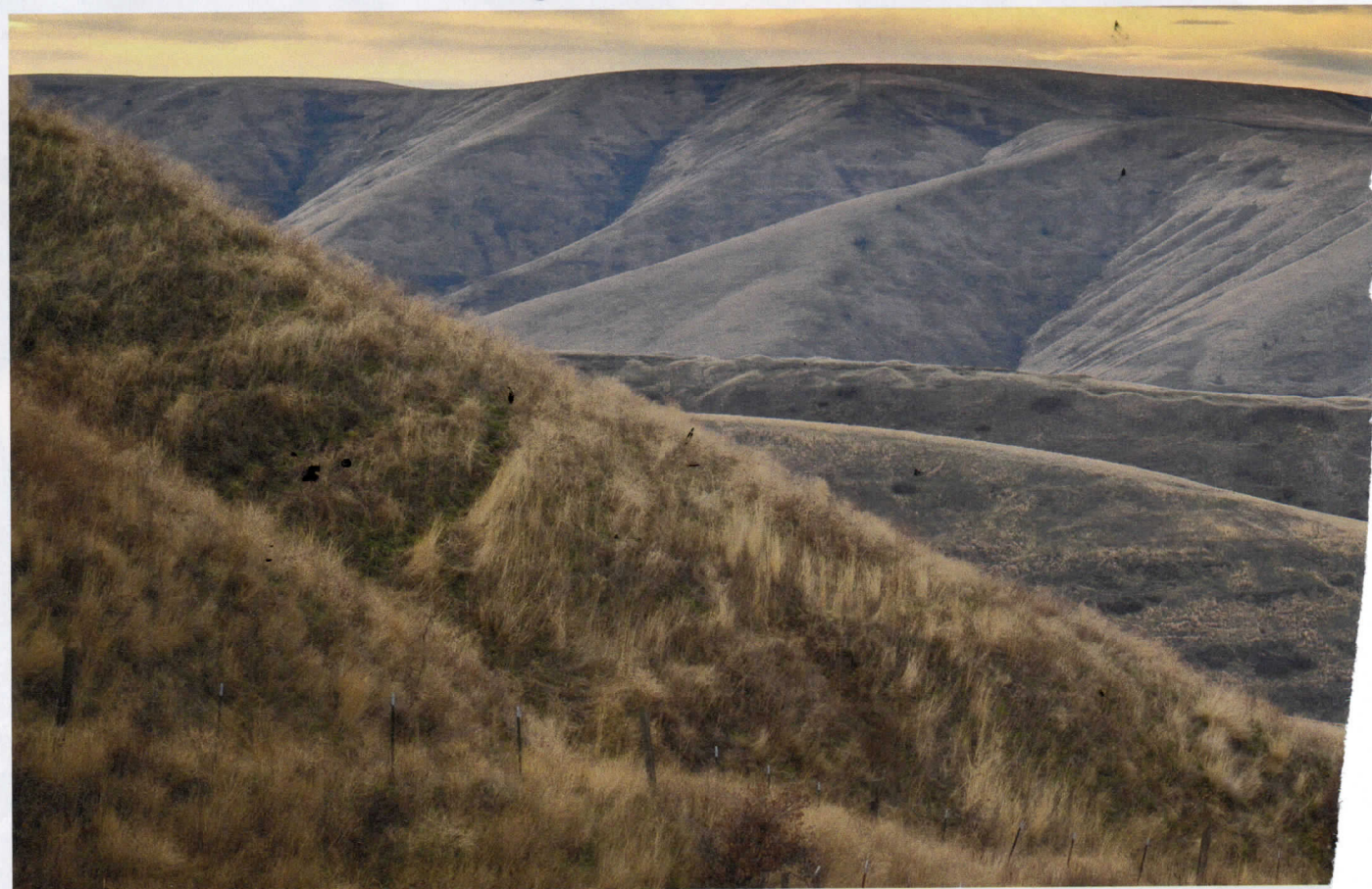
Lower 48 states. Wild mustangs have been here since conquistadors called this country the "northern mysteries."

#### OR IS IT THE PEOPLE?

Buckaroos, prospectors and misfits roam northwestern quail country.

Cactus' grandparents were the last fatalities in the Bannock Indian War ... find the blackened foundation of their burned-out place north of the old stage station. Larry's brother is doing time for cattle rustling. David's abuelo was a vaquero, his flat-topped hat harkening to long-ago Californio days. Wander enough and you'll find a played-out gold mine or willow corral. An ancient apple orchard haunts the flat near a hot springs I soak in.

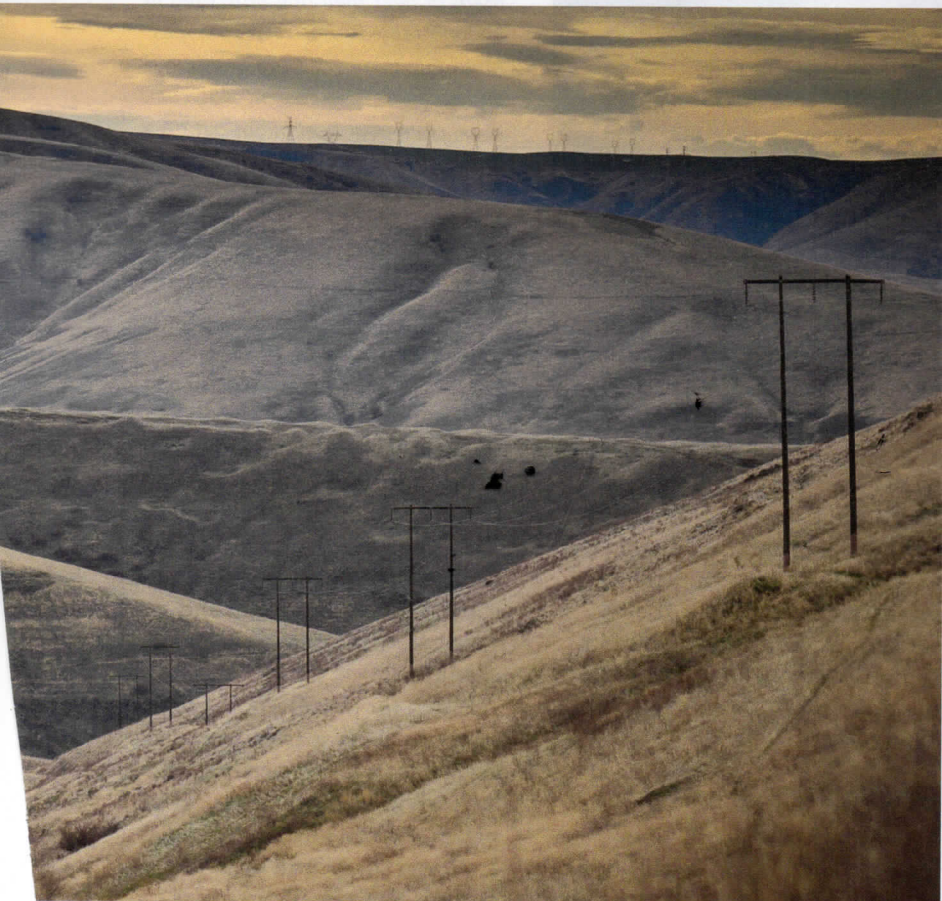
In some native cultures quail are a symbol of earnest communication and social relations. Not surprisingly, hunters who pursue these intriguing birds are gregarious and generous. They covey up, relish







PHOTOS BY SETH BYNUM, DVM



#### « WHERE ARE THEY?

*Public-access ground in valley quail country is often sagebrush steppe, administered by federal agencies, east of the Cascade mountains. Quail call to us from the wrinkles of harsh moonscapes bureaucrats used to call "waste ground."*

*Native to much of their namesake state, they originally inhabited just a small corner of Oregon. They've since been introduced to much of Oregon and Washington. Primarily seed eaters, they relish berries and tender green shoots of almost anything.*

*For public-access DIY hunts, Columbia River tributaries are good starting points, including the Snake, Owyhee, John Day and Deschutes, or Washington's Yakima River region and Palouse country. Google "Great Basin" and explore the hills of this foreboding place where rivers go to die. The Oregon-California-Nevada border region is also worthy prospecting.*



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## « MOUNTAIN COUSINS

John Muir described the mountain quail as “the very handsomest and most interesting of all American partridges ... That he is not so regarded, is because as a lonely mountaineer he is not half known.” It’s still true.

“Slam” seekers come to southwestern Oregon for mountain quail. Odds are best in the high, forested Coast Range, near the towns of Roseburg, Grants Pass and Medford, where manzanita and Douglas firs flourish. Hunting is often a random act while pursuing elk or deer, encountering coveys in food sources ranging from bulbs to hawthorn to streamside herbs. Smaller numbers of mountain quail can be found in the western slopes of the Cascade mountains. I’ve shot them in craggy gulches in valley quail habitat, but not frequently.

You’ll see mountain quail crossing roads or hear their one-note song in impenetrable brush on steep slopes. Mountain quail are a run-and-gun bird and an aggressive flushing dog cut loose from your heel might get them in the air within gun range.

sharing thoughts and learning. My frequent hunting partner wandered riverbottoms as a kid with a mutt who pushed birds into the air by accident. He now prowls the desert with me. A perpetual student of everything, days afield with him are wondrous even when the shooting is sparse.

Up a rutted desert road, a stooped, bowlegged cowboy ambled toward me. Hearing my shot from the top of the draw, quail juju brought him looking for company and an excuse to rest. We emptied a bottle that night, him the personification of quail spirit and I the beneficiary, hanging on his every word.

## LEGEND, MYTH, TRUTH, MYSTERY

They are interchangeable in quail

country. I’ve watched coyotes stalk deer, been shadowed by bighorns, found a golden eagle nest. Our traces are marked by pictographs of bowmen, deer and spacemen.

Burning Man, UFOs, mountain men and murderers are part of the quail country legacy. Volcanoes birthed this corner of the world, still steaming and rumbling. Chasing quail, you are walking on material they belched forth — most from millennia ago, but some bits of sparkling quartz and obsidian from Mount Lassen’s 1915 blast.

## LOOK AND LISTEN

Okay, it’s time to go to school. They’re called “valley quail” for a reason. Probe folds in the land —

gullies, bumps, knobs and hills. Birds leave their shrub or tree roost late in the morning. (Native legend says a covey once stole Coyote’s meat, he chased them into the branches, and has kept them at bay nightly ever since.)

Birds can hold tight for a pointer, and might let a flusher get close enough for an ethical shot. Or not. Stealth is your ally. Silence collar tags, speak seldom and softly, stow the whistle and step carefully.

Listen for the *chi-CAH-goh* siren song of a covey master. Search the skyline for a sentry perched on a rock while his brood feeds. Avian predators train quail to fly at dog-level, and coveys will burst like a flower’s petals in all directions.





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## HUNT HARD, WITH HEART

When the adrenaline rush subsides, walk toward the covey's landing zone. It was likely around a rocky outcrop, ridgeline or stand of trees. The bad news is they'll scatter upon landing, sprinting to cover without catching their breath. The good news is, once they find the birds again they'll hold for a pointer, launching in dribs and drabs.

Quail hearts are the size of your fingernail, and as big as the night sky. They are brave little birds, hunkering unseen under a bush while you pass by or kick around it, buzzing away when you give up. Both mother and father will decoy a predator from a springtime nest with irresistible short, fluttering jumps.

Sometimes, you'd think they had a scintilla of predator DNA. My wirehair pointed the edge of a desert stream, me on the other side. I minced across a flimsy old beaver dam toward the find, until two quail erupted. I ducked from one bird out of self-defense – did he really try to hit me? The other towered like a ringneck and rewarded my dog with a retrieve.

Unpredictable and steeped in routine, valley quail are a conundrum. They come to water daily ... until they stop. When your favorite cover is devoid, go uphill to tiny rock pools that caught last week's rain. Birds dine on seeds until they develop a taste for forbs. Start your hunt where there is a variety of weeds, greens, even Russian olive.

Hunts are puzzling, fascinating, complicated, and the hardest part sometimes comes after the shot. A bunchgrass meadow yielded one bird that fell in a cattail marsh at the bottom of the draw. A long, nail-biting search with too many deathly silent pauses resulted in a delivery to hand. Farther west, a lush swale harbored one quail under each wild rose bush.

The only bag limit I've shot started with a flushing bobcat and ended with a found spear point of ancient origin.

Watercourses are worth a turn even when dry. Dense bankside willows and alders make ideal loafing cover if there's bare ground to power valley quails' number-one escape strategy: running. If you hear their *pit-pit* alarm call, get your shotgun to port arms — it's a NASA countdown already in the single digits.

The roar of dozens of wings rattles you to the core. (Another native American legend: Eagle gave Quail the ability to scare hunters with their oversized soundtrack.) Breathe deep, make note of where hunters and dogs are, then find a going-away bird. They'll juke left when you sweep right, so set your feet for a big swing in either direction.

## MAGIC IN EVERY HUNT

Nash Buckingham called bobwhites "gentlemen." Had he met them, he might have called valley quail "jesters."

Waddling to and fro, whispering to each other, topknots bouncing jauntily, dressed for a night on the town, you can't help but smile. But first and foremost they are the embodiment of untracked land and untamed places far back of beyond. You will exhaust your ammo supply, tax your mental capacity, and return home empty-handed but for a gouge in your gun stock.

But when you finally accept from your dog a vividly-painted little bird that's given its life, you become part of the primitive place that provided the gift.

Some sandal-clad crystal-gazers say dreaming about quail portends opportunity, that something new is coming in your life and you should seize the opportunity.

I suggest hunting them.



*Scott Linden travels all over North America's uplands hosting the Wingshooting USA TV show but mostly it's just occupying time until his next valley quail hunt.*