

SONORAN DESERT SLAM



Text and Photos by Eric Kallen

When viewed from above, the desert in southern Arizona looks desolate and devoid of life. Cast in different shades of orange and red, the desert contains few signs of vegetation, and the only evidence of water is the dry streambeds and gullies carved into the desert floor. Having spent most of my life on the East Coast, this environment was new to me, and I had to remind myself that despite its harsh appearance, the Sonoran Desert is vibrant and home to some of the best quail hunting in the country.

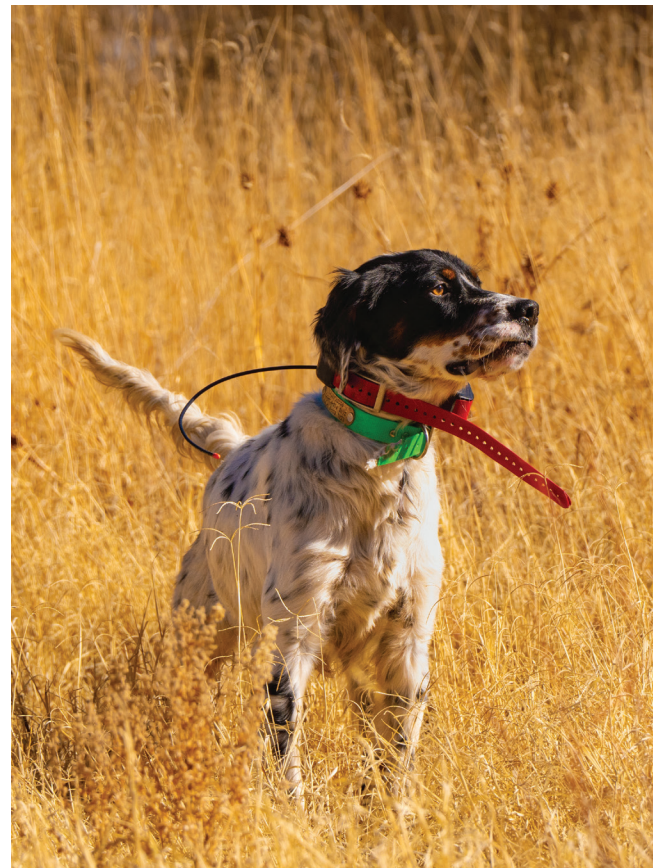
Covering much of Arizona and northern Mexico, the Sonoran Desert has been attracting travelers and adventures for hundreds of years. In 1540, Spanish conquistador Francisco de Coronado made the journey from Mexico in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Gold. Later it was prospectors and gunfighters who came to seek their fortunes and make names for themselves. Most notably was the famous gunfight that took place when Doc Holiday and Wyatt Earp sought to settle a long standing dispute with the Clanton and McLaury brothers at the O.K. Corral.

My trip was not in search of gold or silver, but instead I was there to hunt three species of desert quail: Mearns', Gambel's, and scaled. Despite obvious similarities, each of these birds is distinctly different in appearance, habitat, and how we would need to hunt them. The conditions in the desert can be harsh, and the danger posed by rattlesnakes, javelinas, abandoned mineshafts, sharp rocks, thorny cactus, and dehydration requires diligence and careful preparation.

Assisting us on this trip was a team of well-seasoned Llewellyn setters out of Punto Blanco Gun Dogs in Virginia. These dogs came to Arizona a month before we arrived so that they could gain valuable exposure to the desert quail and acclimate themselves to the harsh environment. Using a well-appointed 42-foot horse trailer as their home base, the Punto Blanco Llewellyns had proven themselves on all three species of quail prior to our arrival.

The morning dawned cold and clear, with temperatures in the low 20s and the prospect for warmer weather once the sun rose and removed the chill from the desert air. Blue-bird skies and a slight breeze presented ideal conditions as we drove west on a path that paralleled the Mexican border. Entering Coronado National Memorial, the snow from earlier in the week covered the hillsides, and the dirt roads required constant

attention as we navigated through the mountains. The higher elevation rewarded us with views into Mexico, and we could see the route that the Coronado Expedition traveled as they made their way northward along the San Pedro River nearly 500 years ago.



The elevation and the area's rocky slopes and narrow draws were perfect habitat for Mearns' quail, which are drawn to rough country and steep hillsides. Mearns' rely more on stealth and are less likely to run than the scaled and Gambel's quail when they are threatened. As our dogs worked



along the rocky slopes, I was grateful for the cooler winter temperatures and the remaining snowpack, which provided the dogs with much needed hydration. Despite the harsh terrain, the Llewellyns' boundless energy provided us with much needed coverage as we worked along the Mexican border in search of quail.

Our morning proved to be very productive as the dogs pointed several coveys of five or six birds each. With the help of our setters, we were able to retrieve the downed birds, and I was able to witness firsthand the beauty of the Mearns' quail.





Possessing a round short body and striking plumage of stripes, streaks, and white polka dots, the Mearns' unique look is well-suited for camouflage in the pine-oak woodlands and grasses of the Huachuca Mountains.

To find the next birds on our list, the Gambel's and scaled quail, we would need to move to lower elevations and hunt the dry valleys and foothills near the Dragoon Mountains. The drive took us through Bisbee, which at one time was one of the richest mineral sites in the world, and then through historic Tombstone, where you can still have a beer at the Crystal Palace Saloon and visit the O.K. Corral.

The appearance of the desert changed as we drove farther north. Oak woodlands and pine forests gave way to dark red hues from the sandstone soil, which served as host to the cholla cactus and thick mesquite that covered the floors of the valley and shoulders of the foothills. The distant snow-capped mountains interrupted the miles of open desert terrain.

Hunting Gambel's and scaled quail can be challenging because they are fleet of foot and prone to run when facing threats. Traditional dog work is rarely effective with these birds, and it is important to keep the dogs close when hunt-

ing. As our dogs ranged, working hard in the dry desert air, we tried our best to keep pace, watching carefully for signs that the dogs had found scent. Flagging tails and noses skimming the ground were a good indication that there were birds nearby. Often the spot where a dog would stop and hold its point no longer held the running birds.

Moving through the thorny mesquite and cactus is hard work and requires diligence and a thick pair of chaps. The time our dogs had spent in Arizona served them well, and their pads were tough and seemingly immune to the thorns and sharp rocks that littered the desert floor. Vigilance was also in order to avoid the abandoned wells and mine shafts that are frequently unmarked. The week before our arrival, one of the Punto Blanco dogs had fallen into an abandoned well, which then required the use of a rope and hasty descent to retrieve the setter, unharmed.

Our hard work was rewarded with the flush of a large covey of scaled quail at the base of a steep bluff. Twenty or more birds took flight, and we brought down a pair. These elegant birds sport a slight tuft on their heads, and their breast and back feathers are marked with a distinct pattern

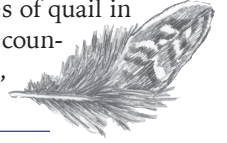


that closely resembles the scales on a fish. Once retrieved, the hunters in our party took turns admiring the quail and its beautiful markings, each of us exhibiting an air of reverence as we held the bird.

Moving deeper into the stands of cactus, we struggled through the thorny desert shrubs, whose only purpose seemed to be inflicting pain on unsuspecting hunters. Zigzagging through the mesquite, with one eye on the dogs and the other on the sharp barbs, we soon flushed a covey of Gambel's quail. With a top-knotted feather adorning its head, these quail are the quintessential desert bird, and shooting one is a worthy feat for any hunter. Of the dozen or so birds that took flight, we were able to shoot a single, the last species in our quest for an Arizona quail trifecta.

Our hunting was very productive, and we were rewarded with a number of scaled and Gambel's coveys on what proved to be our last day in the desert. The arrival of a cold front brought high winds, sleet, and much colder temperatures.

With wind-driven sand infiltrating every exposed surface and large sandstorms visible in the distance, we decided to cut our trip short. The decision was not made lightly, or without some regret, but ultimately we accomplished what we set out to do. We had successfully hunted three species of quail in some of the most challenging and beautiful country imaginable. A trip worthy of recognition, but also a trip that I hope to repeat.



Arizona offers large tracts of federal and state public land open to upland hunting. It's not uncommon for the land to be leased for livestock grazing, so be prepared for fences and barbed wire. The Arizona Game and Fish Department (azgfd.com) and the Bureau of Land Management (blm.gov) are both great resources to start planning your hunt. The desert can sometimes offer indistinguishable landmarks so a mapping app such as onX is a great tool to carry to ensure you don't inadvertently trespass on private land.



