



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

June 10, 2022



California Quail chick
Photo by Jenn Guess

A Topnotch Topknot

California Quail are distinctive birds that can be found in forests and brushlands all along the west coast. They officially became the state bird of California in 1931. These quail are small and round with a teardrop shaped plume (called a topknot) on their heads. The males of the species have striking black faces lined with a white stripe, and bright grey and brown coloration on their bodies. Females are similar in size and shape but have more muted colors and a smaller topknot.



Adult male California Quail
Photo by Jenn Guess

California Quail are very social birds. In the fall they can form flocks of up to 50 individuals but split up into mated pairs in the spring. Males and females will stay monogamous for the season and both parents help raise their young. They build simple nests on the ground under the cover of fallen logs or other shelters. The female can lay up to 16 eggs in the nest, and she incubates the eggs for three weeks while the male stands guard. One day after the chicks have hatched, the family unit will leave the nest area. Quail chicks are precocial, meaning they are able to walk and feed themselves almost immediately after immersing from the egg. Both parents will tend to their young and show them where to find food. The female will keep her chicks warm at night for the first two weeks, or until the small birds are fully

feathered.

CWC receives up to 50 quail each year. Although a handful of these patients are injured adults, the vast majority are orphaned chicks. Since quail are social and only feel safe in a flock, it is critical that single chicks are quickly combined with others of their kind. We house hatchlings in an incubator for the first couple weeks to mimic the warmth of their mother. Since quail chicks are able to immediately self-feed, we never need to handfeed them during their rehabilitation. Instead, we provide multiple food dishes and trays for them to scratch around in. Frequently throughout the day staff and volunteers take a small syringe and tap on the ground at the food to mimic the parents. The young quail become interested in the tapping, investigate, and willingly eat the food near the syringe. In the wild quail have a varied diet. They spend the majority of their time eating seeds, plant material, and bugs. Here we provide them with a special dry food formulated for growing quail and add in additional elements of their natural diet.

The young quail patients at CWC are low maintenance, compared to the significant amount of hands-on time most other orphaned bird species require. They mature relatively quickly and are ready for an outdoor enclosure as soon as they are large enough to keep warm during the cold nights we experience at our facility. After just a few weeks in the aviary, they are ready to be released!



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It is easy to tell if quail have been orphaned. Chicks should always be accompanied by at least one adult. The parents might leave for a few minutes to try to distract a predator, but any small quail left alone for more than 10 minutes needs help. Make sure to observe any potential orphans from a distance, since the presence of a human will prevent the parents from coming back. If a chick has been orphaned, keep them in a warm, quiet, dark location and contact your local wildlife rehabilitation center as soon as possible.