



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

April 19, 2024

Nests in Low Places



Gambel's Quail nest photo courtesy of Wikipedia.



California Quail chicks in care at CWC.

A nest can tell a lot about a species and the environment they inhabit. Bird nests provide protection, insulation and warmth for birds and their egg clutches. Elevated nests in trees, on light posts, and in roof crevasses are not unusual to spot. Anna's Hummingbirds and Cooper's Hawks, frequent patients at CWC and local inhabitants of the area, are examples of avian species that build elevated nests. However not all birds make their nests in high places. One such bird is the California Quail, who are ground nesters.

There are nearly 130 species of quail that can be found worldwide. North America is home to six quail species, with three species native to California: the Mountain, California and Gambel's Quail. All three are uniquely identifiable from their head plumes which vary slightly from species to species and by their unusual call, that many say sound like "chi-ca-go." Due to their prevalence across the state as well as their adaptability to the various environments, the California Quail received the special honor of being named the state bird in 1931. Quails inhabit a variety of environments, spanning from dense woodlands to suburban areas and farmland. The quail's adaptability not only symbolizes California's rich wildlife but also reflects the resilience and diversity of its people.

Quail are ground dwelling birds and are not typically seen flying; they can fly, but normally do so in short bursts. The California Quail can mostly be spotted hopping around, scratching for food and finding the perfect materials and location to make their nests. Quail are a very social species and are usually found in groups called "coveys," which can consist of 10 to 200 birds! They stay in coveys until mating season, when males and females pair off to embark on their journey to parenthood.

While a ground nest seems like the perfect feeding opportunity for prey and suboptimal for the nestling birds, the quail has mastered the art of making ground nests that camouflage with their surroundings. The nests are usually situated in tall grasses or next to shrubbery and can be home to up to 16 eggs. Females may also lay eggs in neighboring nests, which is an uncommon habit in the bird world. Additionally, quail are a precocial species, which means that soon after they hatch, they can move around on their own. Since they are mobile so early, the added protection of an elevated nest is less crucial.