

## F O C U S



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Perhaps the quail in your neighborhood or in a nearby park could use just a little help.

## Our State Bird—*Callipepla californica*

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California Quail are beautiful and perky little creatures that are year-round residents of Pacific coastal hills and valleys from southwestern British Columbia to southern Baja. (Populations east of the Cascade/Sierra ranges are introduced.)

Here are some of the attributes of quail that make them especially welcome in our shared habitats.

### High Perching

When we see a “singing” male teed-up in the spring, his topknot whiffing in the breeze, he is doing as other male birds do at that time—seeking a mate, declaring his territory and warning off other males. (A male California Quail’s topknot is made-up of six or seven specially shaped feathers folded into each other for strength and fashion.)

When we see a male teed-up in the *fall*, looking kind of ratty, he is on sentry duty, watching for an inevitable incoming Cooper’s Hawk while his extended family forages below, at the intersections of open ground and dense cover.

### Late Parenting

In Central California, most year-round resident birds begin nesting in March and early April, but California Quail do not begin until early May, and we do not see their little fluff-ball chicks before June.

The reason for this is that other land-bird species grow their young on insect or arachnid forage, while newly hatched quail rely on late-summer seed crops.

Quail produce 8 to 15 chicks per year, in one clutch. The young are *precocial* (they leave the nest soon after hatching),

and when very small they leave the nest on a nomadic walk-about with their parents and siblings; and predation is high.

When conditions are normal, populations fluctuate greatly but retain their numbers over the long haul by successfully fledging enough young to reach breeding age (“recruits”) and replace the parent birds. When conditions are *not* normal—when predation is abnormally high and sustained (e.g., by cats), or shelter (brush) is removed by humans—populations drop, sometimes to *zero*.

### City Quail

In San Francisco, the quail population has been nearly extirpated (driven out or down) by large-scale habitat loss. The quail in remaining holdouts, Golden Gate Park and the Presidio, are severely threatened by a combination of native and introduced predators and by landscape manicuring by gardeners. Concerned organizations—the Golden Gate chapter of the National Audubon Society, Presidio Trust, and others—became involved, moving to curtail predation. They built brush piles for added cover and planted patches of native coastal scrub. PRBO was called on to help study quail and provide advice on conservation options. Despite these efforts, more needs to be done as the “city” quail population continues to dwindle.



A high-perching male in spring signifies territoriality, while in fall it’s all about watching for predators.

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Rich Stallcup is PRBO’s Naturalist in our Education and Outreach Program.

*To learn more about California’s state bird—and how your yard and garden can benefit wildlife—see the April-June issue of Bay Nature magazine. At [www.baynature.org](http://www.baynature.org), type in a search for “The Gardener and the Quail” by native plant specialist and nature writer Judith Lowry.*