

California Quail: Equipped with natural insulation

BY BRUCE MCCAMMON

What is a plump little bird with a bouncing top-knot that runs across the road or through your yard all year long?

California Quail is the answer.

Gal-
linaceous birds — like quail, turkey, pheasant and chukar — are heavy-bodied, ground-feeding birds.

California Quail are 10-inch birds that have a wingspan of 14-16 inches and tend to run instead of fly. When startled they burst into flight and can move quite quickly for short distances.

Some birds prefer to eat from a suspended feeder. Other species prefer to eat off the ground.

If you feed birds a seed mix in any feeder that is off the ground, you know that the birds drop quite a bit of the seed. Sometimes I think that some spar-



Bruce McCammon is retired, color-blind and enjoys photographing the birds in north central Washington.



rows are designated as “seed kickers” since they seem to be chosen to land on the feeder and kick seed onto the ground for the rest of the birds.

The California Quail is a ground feeder. Much like a chicken, Quail will scratch the ground to uncover seeds.

When we started feeding birds in our yard, I learned that I needed to periodically move the feeders to keep the quail from totally baring the soil.

I jokingly move our feeders around to areas where I think the grass needs to be thatched. The quail that visit us in the morning and evening don't seem to mind providing this service.

If you have the opportunity to observe California Quail

through binoculars or a good spotting scope you will discover the beauty of their scaled underparts and the amazing mix of feather textures and colors.

It's easy to tell males from females since the male has a black throat that is bordered by white. The male's top-knot is much larger than the female's.

You'll also learn that they have a variety of calls for assembly/gathering, to announce their presence and when they are alarmed.

You can listen to the calls here: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/california-quail>.

California Quail seem to be quite adaptable. The photo in this article was taken in Wenatchee in February 2017.

It was very cold outside as the quail came out of their juniper roost, crossed the street and climbed into our front yard.

These two found a place they liked near our front porch and settled in to stay out of the wind.

I admired their stamina as they faced such cold. The birds are adapted to the cold though. They start to look like puffer fish as they fluff up their feathers to increase the insulating effect.

I hope you have several opportunities to watch these amazing little birds this winter.

Think about setting out some nutritious feed for them if you can.

Good luck.