

All gamebirds are introduced, often with great persistence and cost. Small to large plump birds that feed on the ground. Omnivorous but mainly take plant food, scratching and digging at the ground surface with legs and strong claws, and bill. When disturbed, they crouch, run to cover, or burst from cover with whirring wings and alarm notes, flying fast and low to pitch a short distance away. Sexes usually differ: females and immatures have subdued plumage that blends with the surroundings; males are sometimes brightly coloured, but even strongly patterned males blend with their surroundings. Immatures are usually seen with adults, so identity should not be a problem.

CALIFORNIA QUAIL *Callipepla californica*

Common North American introduction

25 cm, 180 g. Small partridge with forward-curving topknot crest plume, smaller in female. Male has a black throat bordered by a white band, blue-grey breast and scaly upperparts. Female duller. Male has a loud 3-syllable call: 'chi-ca-go' or 'where are you?', with emphasis on the second syllable. **Habitat:** Open country with patches of low scrub, riverbeds flanked by willows and gorse. **Breeding:** Sep–Mar. [Sp 146]



146. CALIFORNIA QUAIL *Callipepla californica*

Plate 35

Size: 25 cm, 180 g

Geographical variation: Of the seven subspecies in western North America, New Zealand birds seem most like *brunnescens*, perhaps hybridised with *californicus*.

Distribution: Natural range is western North America from southern British Columbia to Baja California, and within this range *brunnescens* is found in southwestern Oregon and California. They were introduced to both main islands of New Zealand in the 1860s

and 1870s, with later releases of New Zealand-bred stock. Now widely distributed in both main islands, but rare on the West Coast; a few are on the Chatham Islands.

California Quail are found mainly in areas with a mix of open country and low scrub, particularly tussock grassland or rough pasture associated with manuka scrub and, in the South Island, with such dry-country plants as wild Irishman, gorse, broom and briar. They also frequent vegetated

riverbeds and riverbed margins.

Population: Common in certain less intensively developed districts of both main islands.

Breeding: Coveys break up in late winter and pairing begins in late August. Eggs are laid from late September to February, with a peak in early November in Otago but in early December in the central North Island. The nest is commonly in long grass near thick cover of blackberry, gorse or bracken. The female lays 8–13–22 creamy-white eggs (31 x 24 mm), spotted dark and yellowish brown. Eggs are laid daily. The female incubates for 22–23 days. The young first breed when about 1 year old. The oldest California Quail recorded in New Zealand lived over 11 years.

Behaviour: In autumn and winter, family

groups combine to form large roosting coveys. By day they break into smaller coveys that disperse to their preferred feeding grounds nearby.

Feeding: In their first weeks, chicks eat mainly small insects, but they soon adopt the adult diet of fallen seeds of a wide variety of plants, supplemented with leaves of clover and grasses and a few small insects. In late winter and spring, however, vegetation becomes the dominant food. They feed mostly in the early morning and in the last couple of hours before dusk.

Reading: Gurr, L. 1951. *Notornis* 4: 144–145. Leopold, A.S. 1977. *The California Quail*. Berkeley: Univ California Press. Williams, G.R. 1952. *J Wildl Management* 16: 460–483. Williams, G.R. 1967. *Proc NZ Ecol Soc* 14: 88–99.