

Animals of the Chihuahuan Desert

Gambel's Quail

Physical Characteristics

Gambel's quails are small, round birds with a large feather plume at the top of their head. Males are much more colorful. Their plumes are bigger than a female's and the top of their head below the plume is a bright red. Their head and neck is colored with black and white markings while the females are only a grey color.



Diet

Most of their diet comes from the plants around them. This can include native plants to the Chihuahuan Desert such as various cacti and the fruits they produce. They also receive the water they need from these plants helping them to survive in the desert. Gambel's quail also eat insects, though the chicks are more likely to eat insects than adults.

Habitat

Gambel's quail usually live in groups—called coveys. They create their coveys in areas with lots of bushes and thorny vegetation such as in brushy areas of the desert or in canyons. They usually look for these areas near water or in areas of the desert that get the most rainfall. Areas with a lot of grassy brush is necessary for them to hide in.

Senses

The Gambel's quail has many different vocalizations for different circumstances. Their most notable call is a loud three note “ka-KAA-ka” and is used as an assembly call or to locate other quail in the area. “Kow” and “whit whit” calls are used by courting males to attract females. They also are known to use various clucking noises and grunts to communicate between individuals. An alarming “chip-chip-chip” is issued to the covey when danger is near.

Predators

Predators include rattlesnakes, raptors, bobcats, and coyotes. But quail are really good at hiding in bushes and staying really still so the predators can't see them.

Interesting Facts

- There can be up to 25 birds in a covey.
- Just before her eggs hatch, the female Gambel's quail calls to the chicks, who cheep to each other from inside the eggs. The eggs hatch in synchrony, with the chick cutting a neat hole in the largest part of the shell and leaving an intact piece of membrane to serve as a “hinge”—the chick pushes on the shell and opens the “door” that it has created.
- The plume on top of the quail's head is called a topknot.