

The Polka-Dot Mearns Quail of Sonora

the desert bites, stings or sticks. A good pair of brush pants with 1,000 denier protective panels will turn a majority of spines and fangs. I prefer all-leather boots because fabric boots act as a magnet for spines and stickers. A 10-inch boot offers the best compromise of weight, protection and support. Shirts should be long-sleeved, even when the weather is warm, to offer a modicum of protection against catclaws and cholla.

Parton typically carries about eight quarts of water when heading into the field. Most of that is for the dogs, which are expected to run full-tilt for an hour or two. Even in December and January, the amount of walking you will have to do requires plenty of water, and probably some electrolyte supplements as well.

Any good 12, 16 or 20 gauge will handle Mearns quail nicely. Because of the walking, you'll be thankful for a lightweight shotgun. You'll have little need for anything more than improved cylinder. I prefer a light 20-gauge double

or over/under choked skeet/skeet or skeet/improved cylinder. A 28 gauge may be nice to carry, but it throws an awfully small amount of shot, and these birds have a great tendency to quickly put an oak or cholla between you and them. The smaller bore may be fine for the expert shot, but most of us need at least an ounce of hard 7/8s to reliably and humanely bring a Mearns down.

Mearns Quail Conservation

This might be a moot point since, according to the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the average Mearns quail hunter brings just two birds home after a day of hunting, in spite of the nearly three-month season (Nov. 17, 2000 to Feb. 12, 2001). The limit is eight per day, but about the only way to achieve it is to shoot out a family group.

Mearns quail are more of a "destination bird." You don't just casually go out and shoot a mess of them for dinner. The joy of Mearns quail

hunting is being in the wild Southwest. The mountains of southern Arizona seem designed with bird dogs in mind. They're open, rambling, and leave you with a salsa-tangy taste for the bird and its home. You never know whether you'll come across a Coues buck, javelina or maybe a gila monster. If a mess of quail for dinner is your objective, go north a few miles and have a go at Gambel's quail. Mearns quail lead enough of a tenuous existence at the mercy of cattlemen and drought.

A matched pair of adult Mearns on your mantle is more a statement of commitment than an accomplishment. It says that you have walked the mountains and fended off catclaws, cholla and prickly pear cactus. It says that you and your dog have learned how to operate as one—each working off the attributes of the other—and not as some ham-fisted lout who measures his success by the weight and body count in his game bag.

It says you have arrived as a bird hunter.



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