

MAKE MINE MEARNS

Not the largest nor the most colorful of our upland birds, Mearns quail can still provide some top-flight wingshooting. Here are some thoughts on how and where to score on them.

by Tony Mandile

The heavy coating of frost had caused the foot-high grass to lay over, forming little pockets beneath it. As I pussyfooted through the stand of trees, I tried to avoid the partially frozen arches. My effort was futile. Each time my boot touched down, the crisp clumps of grass crunched noisily. I stopped next to a spreading oak, where only the sound of rustling leaves in the gentle breeze disrupted the quiet.

I was on my first Coues deer hunt in southeastern Arizona. My optimism had convinced me a trophy buck would walk out from the trees on the canyon's opposite side. Intently, I scanned the sunlit openings on the far slope.

Suddenly, a loud BRRRRR came from a few feet behind me. I froze in place and listened to my heartbeat an up-tempo rhythm reminiscent of a Jerry Lee Lewis tune.

Since coming to Arizona from New Jersey a year earlier, I had heard lots of strange things. One person told me everything in the outdoors bites, stings or sticks. Someone else advised me to watch where I walked to avoid stepping on snakes and other crawly things. With these helpful warnings in mind, I immediately connected the sound to a 10-foot-long, man-eating rattlesnake.

I didn't laugh when the incident occurred more than 25 years ago.

Now, however, I always smile when I remember my embarrassment after I realized what had scared the bejabbers out of me. A few tiny birds had flushed from their hiding place beneath the grass near my feet, providing a sudden and somewhat startling introduction to the tight-holding tactics of the Mearns quail.

I had no idea what the feathered buzzbombs were at the time. They took off in a whirlwind of motion with wings beating faster than a window shutter in a hurricane. Counting them was out of the question; within seconds, they had disappeared again.

Five years later, I actually hunted the Mearns in the Santa Rita Mountains near Tucson. I had filled my deer tag with a young whitetail buck. While my two companions continued to hunt their venison, I uncased my shotgun and went searching for quail.

I had successfully hunted Gambel's quail a few times and thought chasing Mearns would be similar. I was wrong, though. *(Continued)*

A miniature buzz bomb ready for motion, this Mearns quail is only an eye-blink away from leaving his resting area and heading for a change of scenery. Shooters must be quick to score. Photo by Tony Mandile.