

Madera Canyon Species Spotlight:

### **Montezuma Quail**

As the bird list for the Madera Canyon International Migratory Bird Day gradually lengthened and many expected species names were written on the white board at Proctor Ramada, I began to wonder if anyone would report a lucky sighting of what is arguably the most elusive canyon bird- the beautiful, but shy Montezuma Quail.

Local residents in the canyon, Montezuma Quail are the smallest quail species in the United States. Stocky and plump with short, stumpy tails, the birds somewhat resemble small footballs with stout, gray legs. Males sport a striking black and white facial pattern, reminiscent of Māori warrior tattoos, topped with a buffy-brown crest draping over the back of the head. The neck and back feathers are a rich mix of cinnamon, buff and brown heavily barred with black and divided by long, whitish pin-stripes. Wings are short and rounded with golden-brown feathers spotted with black. Flanks are dark charcoal-gray dappled with white spots; the breast, a rich chestnut. It is a rather audacious combination of colors and patterns for such a small quail!

Females resemble males in size and shape- plump and squat. They are also intricately patterned in cinnamon, brown and buff with black barring and buff pin-striping, but lack the bold, spotted patterns of the male. Additionally, females have a more obscure facial pattern of buff and brown. Both sexes have a short, bluish bill.

Montezuma Quail are residents of the Sierra Madre Occidental and Oriental mountains of Mexico and extend north into the scattered Sky Island ranges of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. The birds are usually encountered in pairs in the grassy and scattered shrubby undergrowth of Madrean Evergreen Woodland from oak-juniper into oak-pine wooded canyons and slopes. Their intricate color patterns and secretive habits make them extremely hard to spot unless foraging out in the open. When approached, these quail crouch motionless, hidden in the undergrowth, only to explode from almost underfoot in a “heart-stopping” sudden whirl of wings. Typically flying only a short distance in true quail fashion, they hide away again quickly in vegetation- as if virtually disappearing before your eyes.

Montezuma Quail relish berries, acorns, seed, seedlings and invertebrates and also scratch up tubers, bulbs and edible roots from the soil. Breeding is timed with summer rains when juicy insects and seedlings are abundant for chicks to feed on. Eight to fourteen eggs are laid in a grass-lined depression hidden in dense grass; males assist in raising the family. Precocious like other members of their tribe, Montezuma chicks are mobile and ready to follow their parents foraging within minutes of hatching.

In Madera Canyon, I've encountered Montezuma Quail in the grassy chaparral flanking the southwest side of Madera Creek, between Proctor and Madera Picnic Area. Despite birding in this area of the canyon, no one reported seeing Montezuma Quail for the

annual canyon IMBD. The quail proved once again to be one of the most elusive avian canyon residents!



Tom Vezo

Tom Vezo photo