

# Survival

*stealing of experience*

## Quail survives trial by water

*Chick*

from the CCIA

Conservation Committee

It was just before noon on a hot mid-summer day that the quail chick got into trouble and a desert drama began to unfold.

I was resting on the patio overlooking our back yard and the "waterhole" which consists of a large red clay saucer, glazed on the inside, and about 22-inches across by two-and-a-half-inches deep. It rests on the ground and is partly overhung by a jojoba bush, which in turn, is overspread by a large palo verde tree, making in all a small oasis midway between the house and the chaparral.

It was too hot for most activity, except for a couple of ground squirrels dashing about, but a family of about 12 day-old quail chicks and their parents moved out from the edge of the cactus and bur sage and hurried in to the "oasis." They all perched in a ring around the edge of the big water tray. Some chicks were able to lean over and dip their beaks in the water, which was about an inch-and-a-half below the edge. Others hopped down into the water.

After a few moments the family began to depart, and the chicks that were in the water fluttered and scratched their way up onto the rim and then to the ground, all except one who couldn't seem to make it.

The water was too far below the rim for him to pull himself out and too deep for him to fly out. Finally the family began to move back towards the edge of the chaparral, leaving the long chick peeping loudly and trying to flutter his way out of the water.

To have moved down to help him out might have stampeded the rest of the family completely, so waiting till they had reached the safety of the bur sage, I hurried the dozen paces to the waterhole and scooped out the somewhat waterlogged ball of fluff.

Instead of racing after the family as I expected him to do, he immediately quieted down and ran around to the far side of the jojoba bush. There was nothing I could do but go back and sit down. Through a small tunnel in the foliage, close to the ground, I

could see with my field glasses the small thread-like legs of the chick.

Half an hour went by while I watched over him. My lunch was long due, but I didn't dare leave my observation post for even half a minute as there had been a roadrunner in the area earlier, a gila monster the day before, and presently two curved bill thrashers were persistently trying to get to the tiny chick. One experimental poke from those rapier beaks could kill the chick, so I kept standing up to frighten them off.

Another half hour went by. How long could this vigil go on? I was getting hungrier by the minute, and my wife was away for the day. Would the quail family perhaps come back, I wondered? Would the chick finally take off into the brush and survive a night of loneliness and terror? The little thread legs never moved by much except for a slight shifting of balance now and then. I longed to have any family of quail show up, as they often adopt orphans, but midday is a time for only very occasional such visits into the sun-baked open spaces.

But that's just what did happen. Some soft liquid sounds, and then the quail family of about the same size and number appeared around the corner of the house and approached rather more quietly than before. This time I counted the chicks — just 10. They disappeared behind the jojoba bush instead of coming around to the front side and the water, and after half a minute the family appeared and hurried away toward the edge of the chaparral. I counted them this time again, and there were 11. I heaved a sigh of relief and hurried into the house for my belated lunch.

I have only described what actually happened. What was behind it all? Was the sacrifice of the one instinctive for the survival and security of the many? Did the parents say, "Now junior, we can't help you out of the water, but if you do get out, quiet down and stay out of sight. We'll be back later on and pick you up." Or was it another adoption by an almost identical family of quail? I often wonder.