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# Quail Show Concern for Babies

by: Linda Voremberg

## BONDING WITHIN QUAIL FAMILIES

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I'm sure that all of us who live in the Desert Foothills area are aware of the bumper crop of Gambel's Quail this past spring and summer.<sup>1</sup> The relatively wet winter we had caused the growth of a lot of green plants which provide nutrients for quail consumption that develop the quail's reproductive organs. It seems that whenever we drive down a back road, we are constantly braking for a family crossing over, Mom in the lead, followed by her string of babies, and Dad bringing up the rear, rounding up the stragglers. My husband and I had our own personal experience and learned a lot about the quail's lifestyle last July.



The first indication I had of this family was when I noticed a lone male marching along the back wall surrounding our yard every morning for about a month. According to my research book, *Arizona Game Birds* by David E. Brown, the hen incubates 10 to 12 eggs for 21 to 23 days while the male guards her and the nest. We were totally unaware all that time that his mate was hidden under a flowering shrub next to our patio.

Then one evening we were grilling dinner on the patio and noticed the male in a mesquite tree behind our wall and the female on the wall having a heated discussion. It was obvious to us that they were upset about something, and we later

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learned that their eggs had hatched, and the babies couldn't fly out of our walled yard. The parents were trying to figure out what to do about this new problem.

The next morning everything became very clear to us in a really exciting way! First my husband, in his usual rounds of the yard, stumbled across the hen crouched in a corner, looking very unapproachable. We wondered what was wrong and went away for a while, trying not to bother her. But she stayed there, and after awhile our curiosity got the best of us. As my husband took one step closer to her, everything seemed to explode. She flew straight up and tiny babies ran out from under her in all directions at once. We were startled as the egg-sized chicks zoomed around us and over our feet. We tried to watch where they all went, and finally they gathered in a screened drain hole in the wall. The father was on the other side calling to them, and they couldn't get through to him. It was obvious to us that he really wanted them out of there, and they were stuck! After a quick discussion, we decided that I needed to help them over, so I knelt down and put my hand in the hole. Out came one downy chick, buff colored and striped in cinnamon with a little "crew cut" of feathers that would eventually become its topknot. I gently placed it on the desert side of the wall where it immediately ran toward the waiting parents under the mesquite. Then I went back and repeated the process until six chicks were safely reunited with Mom and Dad. We thought our mission was accomplished.

But little did we know. It seems that the male Gambel's Quail has a strong parental interest in his brood, and a little later my husband walked out in the yard to find Dad with another chick, trying to get it to fly. My husband herded it into a corner, picked it up, and placed it over the wall with the rest of the family. Now we had them all safely relocated. Right? Wrong!

I kept noticing the male hanging around on the wall, fussing and clucking. I went out and looked all around the yard and couldn't see any chicks. I talked to him, and he kept insisting that there was another baby



somewhere. So I looked in the drain hole and sure enough there it was. I put it over the wall and thought that eight babies were all. But no, the father still insisted on pacing the wall, talking and flying down into our yard. This went on all day. The temperature went up to 108 degrees and still he persisted. We kept going out and looking but couldn't find another chick. Finally, about 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon, we stood in the kitchen and looked out the window. And there was the dad, with a chick at his side, trying to get it to climb up on a big rock and jump over the wall. Of course this wasn't working, so we knew we had to help again. We quietly went out two different doors, gently herded the chick into another drain hole, and tried to fish it out. But this one had a metal bar in the middle which made it impossible for me reach my hand all the way in. So my husband ran and got a ladder and climbed over the wall into the wash and encouraged the chick into running back to my hand. I held it and climbed over the wall and walked it to the tree where the rest of the family was waiting. Happily it ran to them, and we were finally finished with our rescue effort. The father quail never came back, so we knew we had the whole brood of chicks.

But the story is not quite ended. The next day I looked under all the shrubs in our yard. Sure enough, I found under one of them a scooped out place filled with broken egg shells, buff colored with brown spots. Also I learned from my research that the mother quail shelters her chicks for 10 days until they can fly, which was what she was doing that morning.

If we had left them alone in our restricted yard, they wouldn't have been able to get the beetles, worms and grasshoppers that the parents feed them. They would have been very uneasy with our walking around all the time. So I feel we did the right thing. The nest had been safer there from natural predators such as bobcats, hawks, ants, rats and snakes, which eat the eggs.

We were so impressed with the obvious caring and concern that these parent birds had for their babies. And the ability they had to communicate with their chicks and with us was amazing! Now, two months later, a family of quail with grown chicks visits our yard several times a week. The young have their little topknots and the males have "bulls-eye" markings on their plump tummies. We have no proof, but we just know that they are "our babies," and we are so happy to see them.

