

Western Birds

The
Wingshooter's
Newsletter



Upland Opener Forecast

October 18, 2018

The outlook is pretty grim again for Southern California upland hunters

I have been trying to paint a good face on this fall's quail and chukar season, but reality keeps intruding in my rosy outlook.

The more reports that come in, and the more scouting I do as we approach the opener this coming Saturday, all point to a generally bleak opener.

Even the few places I thought might be "bright"

spots by late summer have lost their luster. Overall, no place looks better it was last season. In fact, most places are varying degrees of worse because of poor production this spring. This means we will mostly be seeing smaller coveys consisting of more mature birds going into this year's season.

The fact that we have also had a least two rains in most places already this fall, also means that birds will be more dispersed than most season openers. When you combine that with coveys of mostly mature birds, it all points to the simple fact: This is going to be a much



tougher season that last year.

WEST MOJAVE REGION:

Nick Rojas, a long-time hunter in the west Mojave has been scouting the region since May and is "disappointed."

"I just haven't seen a whole lot. The most chukar I've had on my game camera photos was 24," said Rojas, and that was in a spot where he

has photos of over 200 chukar in a single image in past years.

"We got some rain, we just got it at the wrong time," said Harold Horner, a chukar guide in the west Mojave who said bird numbers are so low he is not taking any clients this season. "The only place I've seen chukar has been to the north in the Rands — and those are all holdover birds. I haven't seen any young."

My own scouting in the West Mojave region has been just as dismal. In a number of trips to guzzlers
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between Barstow, Lucerne Valley, and Apple Valley, I saw one small covey of 17 chukar in a small park off Highway 18 just out of Apple Valley. There were a number of guzzlers where I didn't see *any* sign of chukar.

The quail numbers in this part of the desert are too low to even talk about.

Chukar Production: Poor. Carryover Chukar: Poor. Outlook: Poor.

GREATER RED MOUNTAIN REGION: For those of you who have ever taken one of my seminars, you know that I lump the Rand and El Paso Mountain ranges, the Scodie Mountains, and some of the east side of the southern Sierra Nevada into one area I call the Greater Red Mountain region.

Overall, this region also had poor production this year, and quail and chukar numbers are still well below normal with most coveys consisting mostly of mature birds.

Tim Mahoney with the Ridgecrest Chapter of Quail Forever was blunt in his assessment for chukar for the Rand and El Paso mountain ranges in the Red Mountain-Ridgecrest region.

"It looks dismal. We had a little hatch and very little carryover," said Mahoney. "Most of the guzzlers don't have birds on them at all."

The Scodie Mountains and canyons draining the eastern Sierra Nevada look a little better than the Rands and El Paso region, with at least some production of valley quail that has maintained bird numbers at a below-normal level for this season. Chukar are still well below normal.

Chukar Production: Poor. Carryover Chukar: Poor to Fair. Outlook: Poor. Quail Production: Fair (at best). Carryover Quail: Fair. Outlook: Poor to Fair.

EAST MOJAVE DESERT REGION: There are some slightly brighter reports from the eastern Mojave Desert, especially the higher elevation areas of the Mojave National Preserve. In this area, there was generally just fair production at best, but combined with holdover birds from the good hatch last year, this region will probably be the best bet in the southern half of the state for both Gambel's quail and chukar.

At this year's junior quail hunt on the Mojave Pre-

serve, the hunting was tougher than past seasons because of lower numbers of birds and rains right before the hunt scattering birds.

"I have participated in this hunt for the last five years and this was by far the worst," said Jeremy Corselli, an avid bird hunter from Norco. "We hunted areas that typically held nice coveys of quail only to find nothing. After an extremely tough day we did see three coveys out of seven different locations. Two coveys were under six birds and the largest was 12. Most kids got nothing, I did speak to one 17 year old who got five quail."

Cliff McDonald, the founder and ramrod behind Desert Drinkers for Wildlife (formerly Water For Wildlife),



the group that restores guzzlers and springs for wildlife in the East Mojave, said there are "clearly not as many quail as last year."

"We found birds every where we went [during the junior hunt] — just not as many as last year. Last year was a bumper crop, but I'll say there are half as many this year, which is not a bad thing because last year was just really good."

Chukar Production: Poor to Fair. Carryover Chukar: Fair to Good. Outlook: Fair. Quail Production: Poor to Fair. Carryover Quail: Good. Outlook: Fair.

COLORADO RIVER CORRIDOR: Gambel's quail production along the Colorado River was generally dismal this year. That doesn't bode well for desert hunters in this region. However, production right around irrigated agriculture was a little better and those coveys have produced enough chicks to keep coveys in these areas at fair but below-average levels.

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“Last year we had a crazy good hatch,” said Brian Holland, owner of Walter’s Camp on the Colorado River near Palo Verde and an avid bird hunter. “We had a lot of double hatches and a lot of birds, but this year, I have not seen a quail since March.”

Robin Wellman, a long-time Blythe hunter, was more blunt. “It’s as bad as it’s ever been,” said Wellman.

This part of the desert also was hammered by big rains earlier this month with some areas getting two inches of rain and most places over a half-inch.

“We got more rain Saturday (Oct. 13) than we’ve gotten all year,” said Wellman.

Wellman did report seeing far more quail on the Arizona side of the river, especially on the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) Reservation near Poston.

Quail Production: Poor to Fair. Carryover Quail: Fair. Outlook: Poor to Fair.

CARRIZO PLAIN REGION: The quail numbers have tumbled again in the Temblor and Caliente mountain ranges on both sides of the Carrizo Plain. Last year was much better than predicted with good production, but while there are decent numbers of holdover birds, production has been dismal.

“We had lousy production,” said Dave Hardt, an avid upland bird hunter and retired refuge manager at the Kern National Wildlife Refuge. “I did four [brood] surveys and I had 1/4-young per adult bird which is worse than lousy. Most bird hunters see are going to be adults.”

Hardt said he has only seen a very few chukar and not a single chukar chick.

Chukar production: Poor. Holdover chukar: Poor. Chukar outlook: Poor. Quail Production: Poor. Holdover quail: Fair. Outlook: Poor.

Summary reports for other regions:

VENTURA-SANTA BARBARA REGION: The canyons in the Los Padres National Forest from Frazier Park west to Highway 33 and all the way up the coast into the San Luis Obispo region had generally poor production this year, like most other areas, but a fair number of carry over birds should provide some hunting.

YUCCA VALLEY TO INDIIO REGION: The desert and foothill canyons on east side of the San Bernardino Mountains and both north and south of Joshua Tree National Park have experienced poor quail production this year. While there was a decent hatch last year, overall numbers were still low so the number of holdover birds for this year is poor. Tough hunting is forecast.

IMPERIAL VALLEY-SALTON SEA REGION:

The desert mountain ranges east of the Salton Sea saw generally poor production this year. Thankfully, there was a decent hatch the previous two years and there are a fair number of holdover birds. This area is back to below average bird numbers.

SAN DIEGO REGION: Quail numbers have maintained their numbers here with fair production overall. However, many areas produced very few young, and the number of carryover birds is just fair. The dryer eastern sides of the mountain ranges toward the Imperial Valley will be poor, but there will be some hunting closer to the coast.

SAN BERNARDINO-RIVERSIDE REGION: The San Bernardino National Forest lands and the pockets of public land on the edges of the urban areas of western Riverside and San Bernardino counties look worse than last year because of spotty production and just fair numbers of holdover birds. Most of the country is chaparral which is difficult hunting unless you can find birds in recent burns. It’s going to be tough.

— Jim Matthews

Limits: Should we show restraint during the 2018 hunting season?

While the Department of Fish and Wildlife has abrogated its responsibility to set season bag limits based on actual survey numbers, it is pretty clear this is one of those years where hunters should show restraint to make sure enough birds remain in coveys to maintain their numbers in an area.

So what should the quail limit be this year in Southern California? I generally base what I shoot on covey size. If a covey is less than eight birds, I usually don’t shoot at all. It varies above that.

My maximum daily bag limit will be four birds per day, based on what I’ve seen this year. Most hunters learn the areas they hunt and can tell what is likely acceptable in an area — and it can be different from area to area. It’s a matter of showing some educated restraint when bird populations are low — like this hunting season. I also try to shoot just males, which can add to the fun of a hunt.

“Leave a few seed birds so we have breeding stock when conditions improve,” said Dave Hardt, a former US Fish and Wildlife Service refuge manager and avid bird hunter. That’s a good bottom line.

— Jim Matthews