

Grouse, quail seasons open

September 22, 2022



For the first time in three years, grouse and mountain quail hunters should find the state's national forests along with California Department of Fish and Wildlife properties mostly open for hunting when the season began Sept. 10. That's the good news.

The discouraging news is that the state is once again confronting severe wildfire conditions with recent wildfires, active wildfires and fire restrictions occurring in some national forests historically popular with grouse and mountain quail hunters, including the Tahoe National Forest, the Modoc National Forest, the Klamath National Forest and the Six Rivers National Forest. Hunters are strongly advised to check for any emergency closures when planning their hunting trips. In the past two years, extremely dry wildfire conditions forced the closure of most of the state's national forests and many adjacent CDFW properties just as hunting seasons for these special upland game birds were about to begin.

Ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*) and sooty grouse (*Dendragapus fuliginosus*) along with mountain quail (*Oreortyx pictus*) are forest-dwelling birds that offer hunters plentiful public land hunting opportunities. These species have been impacted by both wildfire and drought. The birds have lost forest habitat and

hunters have lost some of their favorite bird hunting spots because of recent wildfires. A third year of California drought means less green grass and fewer seeds for the birds to eat and fewer insects that their chicks depend on in the first weeks of their lives. Burned habitat, however, does offer hope that it will regenerate anew to provide even better quail and grouse habitat in future years.

Hunters are reminded that nonlead ammunition is required when hunting grouse and mountain quail and when taking wildlife anywhere in California with a firearm.

Ruffed Grouse and

Sooty Grouse

Ruffed grouse are the most widely distributed resident game bird in North America, found in every Canadian province and from New England to Alaska in the U.S.

California accounts for just a tiny portion of their overall range and the birds are limited to the far northwestern corner of the state, primarily in Humboldt and Del Norte counties and portions of Trinity and Siskiyou counties.

Ruffed grouse favor young forests and disturbed forests, particularly aspen with a patchwork of small clearings created by logging, wind or wildfire. All the better if those clearings have some brush for cover and downed logs for display and drumming.

Sooty grouse are much more widely distributed throughout California's forested landscape.

Sooty grouse can be found in the northernmost parts of the state and along the spine of the Sierra Nevada mountains extending south to Inyo County and the edges of the Central Valley.

Both sooty and ruffed grouse are subject to the statewide hunt zone (PDF) and can only be legally taken in 28 of California's 58 counties. The forest grouse season runs from Sept. 10 to Oct. 10, 2022. Shooting hours are from one-half hour before sunrise to sunset. The daily bag limit is two – all of one grouse species or a mix of the two species. The possession limit is triple the daily bag limit.

Mountain Quail

The colorful mountain quail is the first of California's three native quail species to open to hunting each year. California's early mountain quail season opens Sept. 10 and runs through Oct. 14 in the Q1 Quail Hunt Zone that encompasses all or parts of 26 counties in the northern part of the state and along the foothills and spine of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Beginning Saturday, Oct. 15, mountain quail can be taken as part of the statewide quail season that runs through Jan. 29, 2023.

As its name suggests, mountain quail can be found within forested, higher elevations typically than either the California quail (*Callipepla californica*) or the Gambel's quail (*Callipepla gambelii*). Mountain quail favor

edge habitat and hunters would do well to begin their early season hunts at the 5,000 to 7,000 elevation ranges at least until winter snow forces the birds down to lower elevations later in the quail season.

Mountain quail are unique among the North American quail species. They are the largest of the quail and are not sexually dimorphic, meaning male and female mountain quail are identically plumed and difficult to distinguish from one another, even in hand.

Identification is key when hunting mountain quail in the early season so as not to misidentify birds and shoot a California quail by mistake where their habitats can overlap. Shooting hours are from one-half hour before sunrise to sunset. The daily bag limit is 10 mountain quail. The possession limit is triple the daily bag limit.

Minimum hunting requirements for both grouse and mountain quail are a valid hunting license and upland game bird validation (validation not required for Junior Hunting License holders) and good footwear.

A light, fast shotgun of almost any gauge is the ideal tool given the long hikes often involved in searching for these birds and the quick, fleeting shots they sometimes present amid dense cover and forested habitat. Nonlead shotgun shells are required. Eye and hearing protection is recommended. A cooler with ice to store your birds, particularly in hot September weather, is always a good idea.

For many grouse and quail hunters throughout the nation, a well-trained hunting dog is a quintessential part of the overall experience, a valuable companion in locating birds and finding downed game. Plenty of California hunters, however, do quite well hunting grouse and mountain quail without the help of a dog.

Grouse and mountain quail hunters should know that California's tree squirrel season also opens Sept. 10, throughout northern California and central portions of the state, offering mixed-bag opportunities as tree squirrels will often share the same forested habitat as grouse and mountain quail.