

# Small Game of New Mexico



Cooperative Extension Service

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# Small Game of New Mexico

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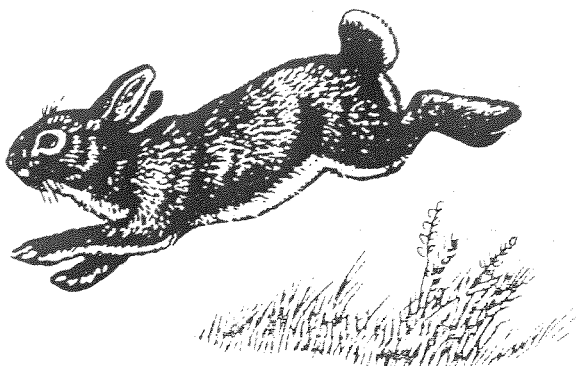
## WHAT IS SMALL GAME?

Have you ever watched a colorful male pheasant strut around the countryside? Or a prairie chicken puff out his neck and spread his tail in his mating dance? Or a mother quail suddenly scatter her young when she feels danger is near? Or a rabbit hop speedily through a field? The chances are good that you have seen at least one of these displays of small game.

In New Mexico, the group of animals called small game includes all upland game birds (pheasants, quail, grouse and prairie chickens), and three migratory birds (band-tailed pigeon, white-wing and mourning doves).

Some small animals in New Mexico are classed as nongame animals. Nongame animals fall into two groups. Hunting is allowed, during the proper season, on the first group and often there is no limit on the number of animals that can be taken (rabbits, hares, prairie dogs). The other group of nongame animals is protected and may not be hunted or captured at any time.

Further information on the laws and regulations about nongame animals can be obtained from the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish or from businesses that sell hunting and fishing licenses.



*Suggested Activity:* Make a list of small game animals found in your area. Describe the type of habitat in which each animal is found. List the foods each animal eats.

## SMALL GAME MANAGEMENT

### Wildlife Habitat

Small game management involves managing land to produce yearly crops of small game for recreational use. The amount of game produced depends on the amount and quality of habitat (cover, food and water) available. Food is generally plentiful in New Mexico. Water, however, is sometimes scarce. We must also manage wildlife habitat so that sufficient quantity and quality of food is available.

### Habitat Improvement

Much of New Mexico's small game habitat is on private lands. Therefore, we must work in close cooperation with landowners in habitat improvement programs.

Habitat can be improved for small game by planting trees, shrubs, grasses, legumes and grains. Unfortunately, this kind of habitat improvement can be costly, and the woody plants require care for several years before their value is seen.

It is also important to maintain existing cover. When practices such as burning, mowing and grazing are misused, wildlife habitat can be damaged severely.

Burning fence rows, ditch banks or uncultivated areas simply to remove weeds can be harmful to wildlife. Despite popular beliefs, burning does not solve the weed problem. Rather than

burning of weeds each spring, weeds can be replaced with grasses. Grasses tend to control weeds by preventing weed growth. Good grasses for this purpose include crested wheatgrass, orchard grass, Russian wild ryegrass and brome grass.

Modern mowing machines kill many nesting birds. If mowing is delayed until after spring nesting, this loss can be reduced.

Overgrazing can also lead to destruction of wildlife habitat. Fencing grazed areas can prevent such destruction. Proper timing and intensity of grazing also protects habitat.

*Suggested Activity:* Draw a map of farm or ranch, showing areas that provide wildlife habitat. Mark areas that could be improved for wildlife. List the wildlife found in the area.

### Small Game Stocking

Attempts have been made to increase game populations by releasing hatchery-raised quail and pheasants into areas where there were few birds. However, hand-raised birds are more tame than wild birds and are easy prey for their natural enemies. In many instances, the habitat at the release site is unsuitable. As a result, this program has been mostly discontinued.

### Hunting Small Game

The hunter is usually more successful if he understands the basic traits of the game and uses this knowledge to predict where the game is located.

Game is most likely to be found in areas that provide good cover. Such areas include weedy fence rows and ditch banks, brush piles and fields of crops. Arroyos with ground cover also provide good cover.

Small game is most easily located with the help of a hunting dog. Without a dog, it is best to hunt with a partner. The hunter who works alone and without a dog is least likely to be successful.

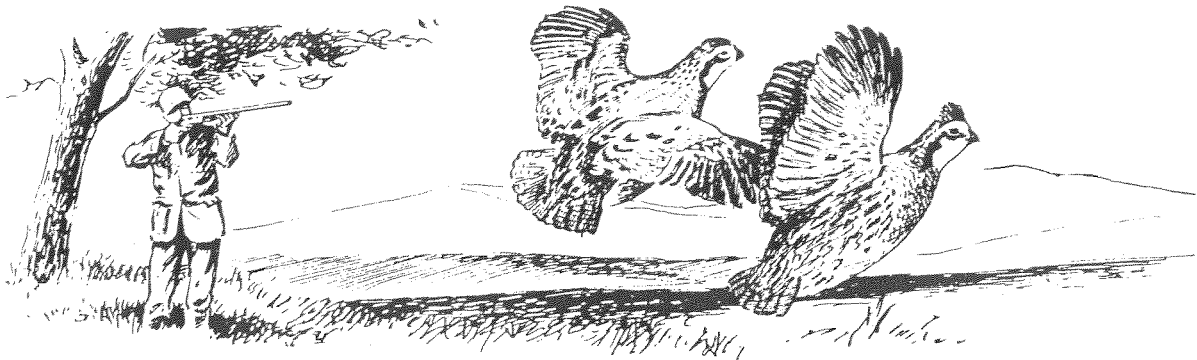
Different types of small game behave differently when they detect an approaching hunter. Some small game sit tight, hoping they will not be seen. Others remain within the cover but move farther away, or travel through the cover and escape on the opposite side, away from the hunter.

*Suggested Activity:* Go hunting with an experienced hunter. Observe and learn the methods he uses for locating and shooting small game. Prepare a report on what you learned.

### Small Game Hunting Regulations

Hunting regulations for small game are set so the more abundant animals can usually be hunted to a greater extent than the less abundant ones. A few small game animals are completely protected from hunting because their numbers are limited.

*Suggested Activity:* Obtain a copy of New Mexico's small game regulations. Learn the laws regulating small game hunting. Ask your local Wildlife Conservation Officer or Area Game Manager about the management reasons for these laws.



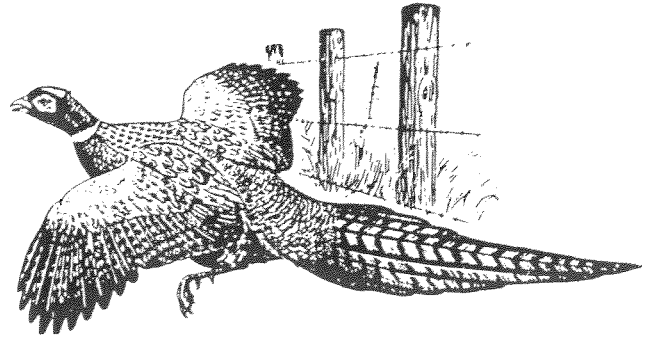
## RING-NECKED PHEASANT

The ring-necked pheasant is one of the largest upland game birds in New Mexico. Their size and strong flight, the delicious flavor of their meat, and their ability to live under unfavorable conditions make them excellent game birds.

The male is a fairly large bird, distinguished by his long tail, white neck ring and brightly colored feathers. The brown-colored hen lacks the brilliant coloration of the male. The white-winged pheasant is found in many parts of New Mexico. It is similar to the ring-necked, but lacks the white neck ring.

The ring-necked pheasant did not originally live in America, but was introduced from Asia. In New Mexico, ringnecks are found primarily in farming areas.

During mating season in early spring, cocks maintain harems (groups of hens). The hen is selective in choosing nesting cover. She may abandon several nests while hunting for the best

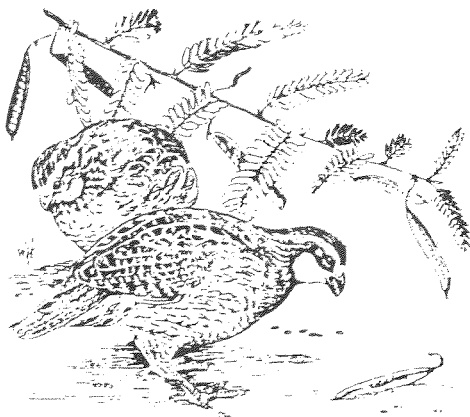


nesting site. However, once a single chick hatches and lives for a week, the hen is through nesting for the year.

Pheasants usually eat cereal grains, weed seeds, green leaves of plants and some insects. We can help these birds in New Mexico by supplying good nesting and winter cover.

## THE QUAIL FAMILY

Three main species of quail live in New Mexico: the scaled quail, bobwhite quail and Gambel's quail. A fourth species, the Mearn's quail, is sometimes seen in the southwest part of New Mexico. Quail are well adapted to agriculture and civilization. Because they are ground-feeding birds, they find plenty of food and cover in farming regions. Quail help the farmer and rancher by eating many harmful insects and weed seeds.



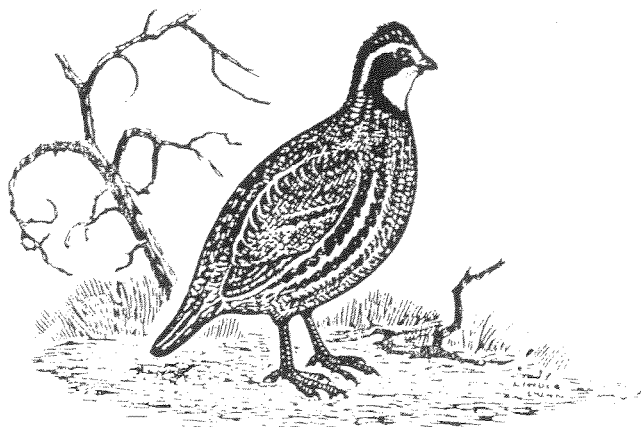
Protective coloration makes quail almost invisible against their natural surroundings. They live together in groups called coveys. Quail escape their enemies by scattering in all directions on strong wings or long, sturdy legs. When scattered, they regroup by calling each other in piping voices.

Nests are on the ground, usually in clumps of grass or weeds, or under bushes. Quail chicks are covered with down feathers and are able to run within a few hours after they have hatched.

Most of New Mexico's quail live in dry areas. However, they must have a little water daily. Development of sources of water, such as water catchment basins (guzzlers), will benefit quail.

Quail are excellent sporting birds, being swift in flight and good runners and the meat has a pleasing taste.

## Bobwhite Quail



The small bobwhite quail has reddish-brown and gray feathers. The male has a white line over the eye and down the neck, and has a white bib. These head and neck markings are brownish-yellow on females.

The bobwhite is found in eastern New Mexico, primarily in areas of dense vegetation. They have benefited from the agricultural development in the United States because small farming areas provide ideal habitat. They live in small flocks called coveys, and prefer cultivated or pasture land with patches of brush for shelter.

During mating time, males sometimes fight each other fiercely but males also help feed and protect the young. Bobwhite normally feed on weed seeds, grain and insects.

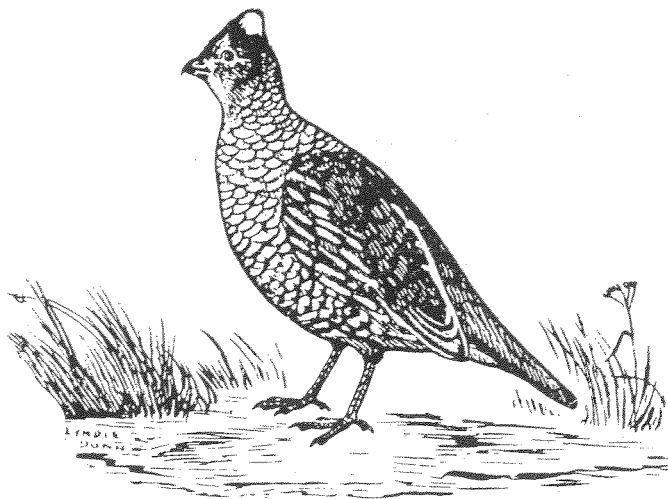
## Scaled Quail

Scaled (or blue) quail often show interest and curiosity toward man and, sometimes, even their enemies. They depend upon their color and running ability for protection, and rarely fly unless in extreme danger. Because of their protective coloration, they are more often heard than seen. Their call sounds like "pe-cos, pe-cos".

The scaled quail's head is tipped with pure white feathers that stand up to form a bushy crest. This is why they are often called cotton top. Most of the body under parts and the neck have a fish-like scaled appearance. The body is mostly bluish gray in color.

Found mostly in dry areas in southwestern United States, the scaled quail makes its New Mexico home in the plains and foothills, favoring rocky washes and gullies.

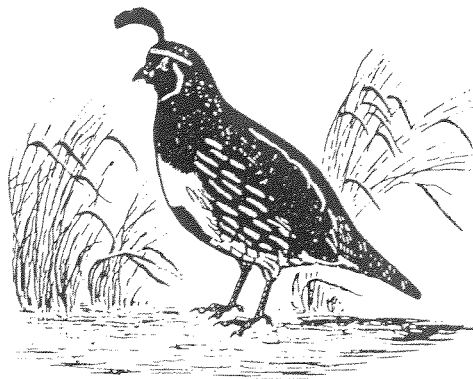
Scaled quail live in flocks of up to 100 birds. They feed on weed seeds, grain and insects.



## Gambel's Quail

Gambel's (or desert) quail are elegant and graceful birds, and always seem to be in motion. They can be identified by their call that sounds like "cha-cha".

This handsome bird is bluish gray in color. One white line outlines the top of the male's head, and a second outlines a dark bib on his neck. The top of the head is reddish brown with a black plume (feathered topknot) that distinguishes it from other New Mexico quail.



## THE GROUSE FAMILY

The grouse family is characterized by feathers over the feet and over the nostrils. Grouse spend much of their time scratching for food with their strong, chicken-like feet. Unlike other game birds, most grouse feed mainly on buds, needles, and leaves of trees and shrubs. This feeding method is essential for their survival during winter when snow covers the ground. The pro-

tective colors of grouse often allow them to remain unnoticed until nearly stepped on. They take to flight with a startling flurry. Grouse are often curious and unwary birds.

Like many other birds, male grouse strut and call during the spring mating season to attract females. Males often fight, although little or no damage is done.

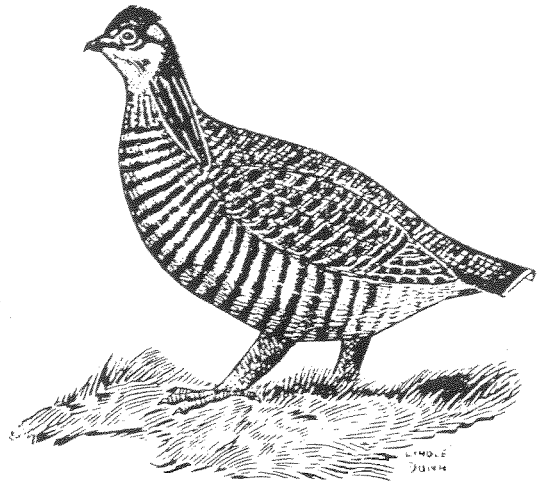
### Prairie Chicken

The prairie chicken (also called pinnated grouse) is identified by its brown feathers and short, rounded, blackish tail. The entire body is barred with black. Males have a tuft of stiff dark brown feathers along each side of the neck.

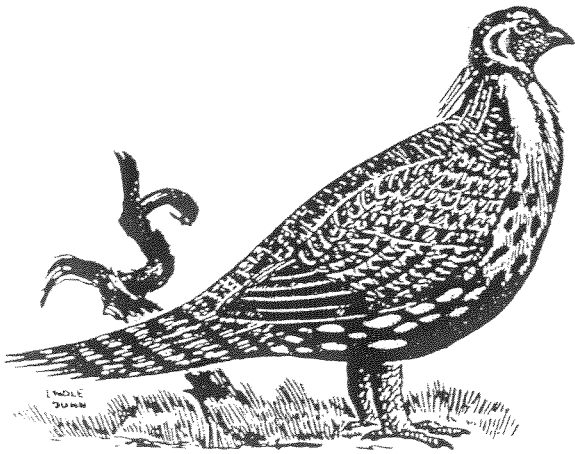
Prairie chickens live on the eastern plains in grassland habitat. These birds were once numerous, but intensive farming and grazing has greatly reduced their numbers.

They perform remarkable breeding displays. Males attract females by inflating their orange air sacs and making a "boom-a-boom" sound, which can be heard for a mile or more. A stiff, jerky dance is performed. The same booming grounds are used each spring.

Prairie chickens eat insects, fruits, leaves, flowers, seeds and grain. Hunting is limited to specified areas in eastern New Mexico.



## Sage Grouse



Sage grouse are strong fliers and can fly several miles between feeding, drinking, roosting or loafing areas. In winter, they often come together into flocks of more than 50.

The sage grouse (or sage hen) weighs up to 9 pounds, and is the largest of all American game

birds except the turkey. It is gray-brown, mottled with black and white. Males have a yellow stripe on each side of the neck that identifies the air sacs.

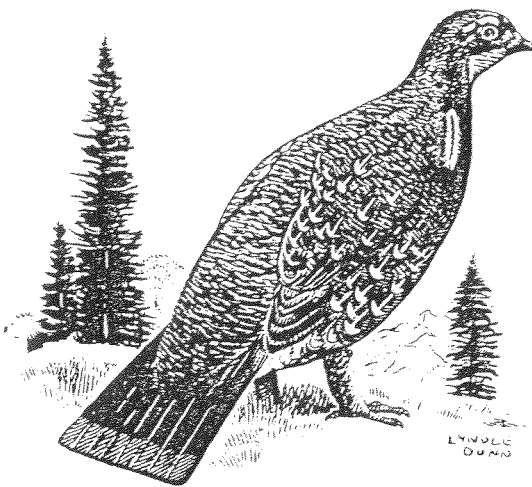
Mating season begins early in spring. The males strut around with their huge air sacs filled with air so the head and neck are balloon-like in appearance. Their tail is erect and spreads out like a strutting turkey. The air sacs produce rumbling sounds. Sage grouse use the same strutting grounds each year.

These birds are confined to the sagebrush areas of New Mexico where their winter food is almost entirely sagebrush leaves and shoots. The destruction of sagebrush lands has seriously reduced their numbers in some areas. Sage grouse require water in summer, but are able to use snow and moisture from their food for water in the winter.

Sage grouse are not hunted in New Mexico because of their small numbers.

## Blue Grouse

Blue grouse are sometimes called fool hens because of their tameness and somewhat foolish curiosity. They are fairly large birds, next in size to the sage grouse. They are also called dusky and pine grouse.



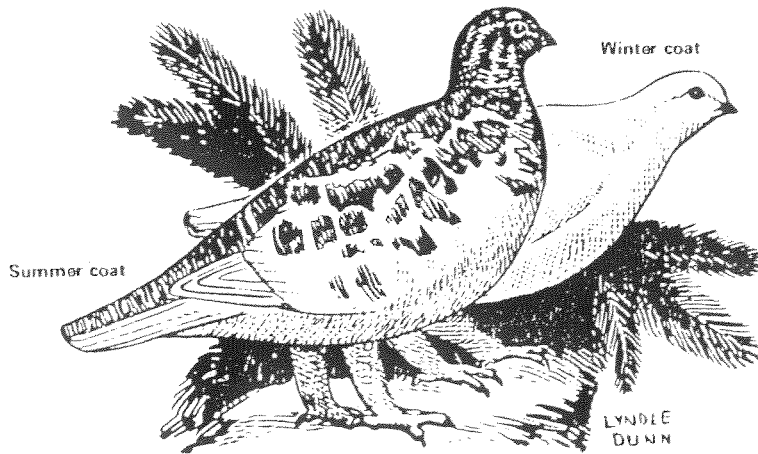
Blue grouse are slate gray, mottled with black and brown. The tail is brownish with a broad gray band and has a black tip. A white line runs back of the eye.

The blue grouse lives alone or in small flocks in the forests of the Rocky Mountains. They sometimes migrate to high country in winter where the weather is so severe that few other animals dare spend the winter there. During winter, food consists primarily of the buds of spruce and pine trees. Summer foods include insects, wild berries, leaves, buds and small twigs.

Mating season comes in early spring, and begins with displays by the males. They puff the air sacs on the sides of their neck, spread their feathers, and strut about the females. A deep "boom, boom, boom" results when air is forced out of the air sacs.



## White-tailed Ptarmigan



Ptarmigans are one of the few birds that wear two different coats, one in summer and one in winter. In March, the feathers begin to change from all white to a mottled combination of white, brown and black. In fall, it loses the black and brown feathers and its new coat is pure white to blend with the snow. Ptarmigans' feet are covered with hair-like feathers, giving the birds built-in snowshoes.

Living high in the mountains, nearly always above timber line, they gather in small flocks in winter. They nest in alpine meadows between rocks, under alpine willow or in clumps of grass.

They eat mainly willow, grass, leaves, stalks and flowers of alpine plants in summer, and willow buds and leaves in winter. Protection of willow on the alpine tundra will benefit ptarmigan.

Ptarmigan are rare in New Mexico, found only in the Pecos Wilderness where they have recently been reintroduced and are totally protected.

The ptarmigan has little fear of man, making it easy to approach these birds. When flushed, they fly only a short distance, and escape by running among rocks.

## PIGEONS AND DOVES

### Band-Tailed Pigeon

Of the 17 kinds of wild pigeons and doves that visit this country, only the bandtailed pigeon, the mourning dove, the white-wing dove and the ground dove are found in New Mexico. Like doves, the band-tailed pigeon comes to New Mexico in spring and leaves in the fall.

Band-tails are similar in size to domestic (barn) pigeons. Unlike domestic pigeons, band-tailed pigeons never show any white in flight.

The band-tail is slate gray with a light gray band across the end of its tail. A greenish bronze shininess covers the back of the neck and shoulders. They usually have a white crest across the back of the neck.

Preferring forest habitat, band-tails live at high elevations during summer.

Both males and females help build the nest of twigs. The first food young pigeons (squabs) are fed is called pigeon milk, a fluid from the throat of the parent bird. After leaving the nest, squabs join flocks that feed on grain, acorns, seeds and berries.



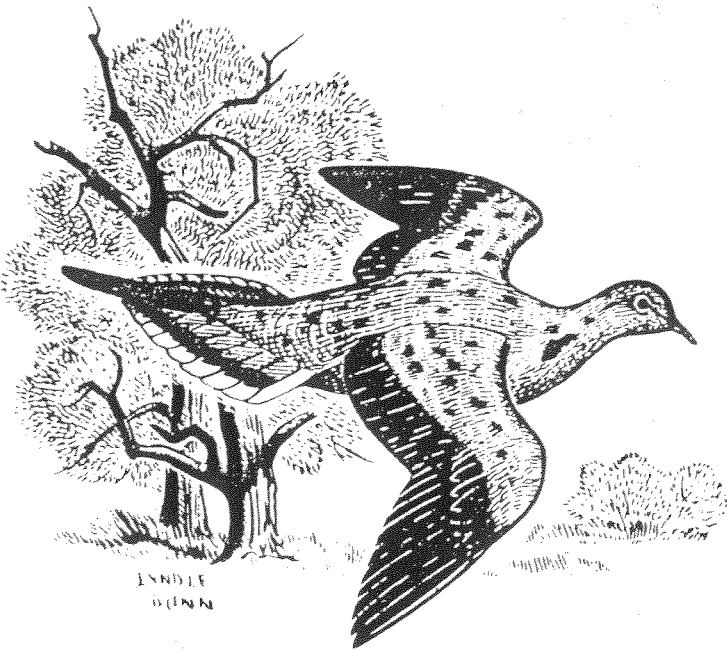
## Mourning Dove

The mourning dove is generally gray in color, with purplish bronze on the shoulders, back and tail. The tail is pointed, while pigeons have rounded tails.

The male dove selects the nesting territory and the female is attracted by the male's cooing. She selects a place for the nest, which is built of sticks and weeds. Doves may nest several times each year, and nests may be on the ground, in a cliff, or in trees or shrubs. Both parents feed the squabs (young) by returning partly digested food (in the form of a milk-like substance) from their throat into the mouths of the squabs. As they become older, doves feed on grain, weed and grass seeds and berries.

Doves are considered excellent game birds. Their flight is swift and irregular, making them difficult targets. Hunting doves, like other migratory birds, is governed by federal laws as well as state laws.

There are several ways to help mourning doves. Planting trees provides nesting and resting sites. Protecting weed patches, such as sunflowers, provides needed food and cover.

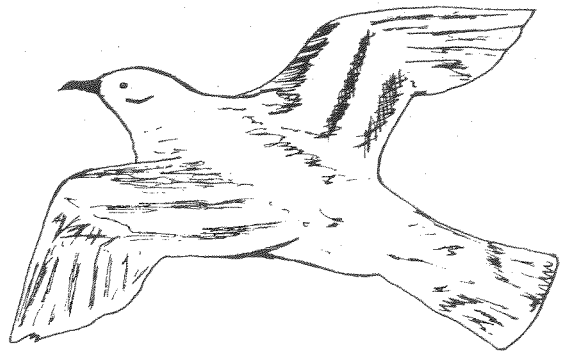


Mourning doves (also called turtle doves) can easily be identified by their mournful "coo" and by the faint whistle of their wings when taking flight.

## White-Winged Dove

The white-winged dove is found in southwestern New Mexico, but is also found in the surrounding states of Arizona, Texas, California, southern Nevada, and as far south as Mexico.

The white-wing is the only dove in the United States with large white wing patches. Its body length is comparable to the mourning dove, but the tail is much shorter and body larger.



## RABBITS AND HARES

The cottontails are New Mexico's only true rabbits. The jackrabbit is actually a hare. True rabbits build a nest and their babies are born furless with their eyes closed. True hares do not build a nest and their babies are born fully furred and with their eyes open.

Cottontail rabbits have always been popular game animals. The cotton-tail rabbit provides more hunting recreation in the United States than any other game animal. They are rather small rabbits, and are most active at night. Two to four litters are produced yearly.

The two most common kinds of jackrabbits that live in New Mexico are the black-tailed and the white-tailed. Both are rather large hares and are active at night.

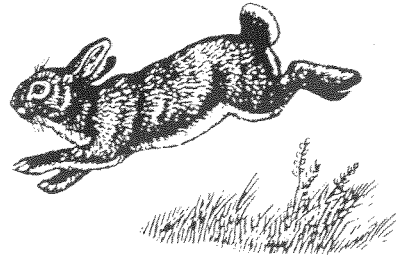
Jackrabbits can become pests in farming areas. In New Mexico they are considered non-game animals and can be hunted year round.

Because they are strictly plant-eating animals, rabbits and hares can cause serious damage to shrubbery and fruit trees.

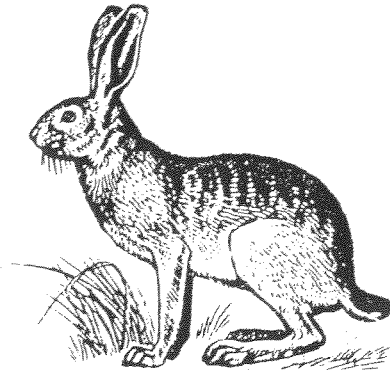
Rabbit numbers vary irregularly from high to low and back to high on a cycle of about 10 years. The highs and lows occur whether the rabbits are hunted heavily or not at all.

Many predators such as eagles, hawks, owls, coyotes, skunks and weasels prey upon rabbits, hares and their young. When frightened, rabbits and hares run with such speed that few dogs can catch them.

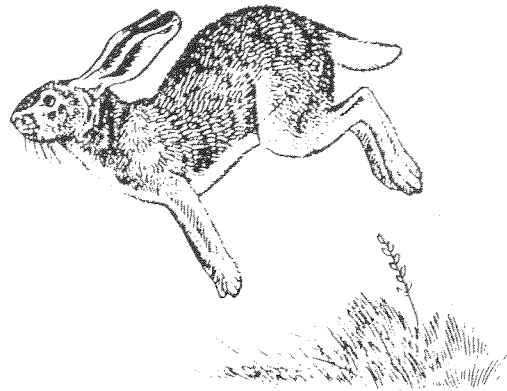
We can help rabbits and hares by planting brush, building brush piles, and allowing some natural food and cover to stand in and around cultivated fields.



COTTONTAIL



BLACK-TAILED JACKRABBIT



WHITE-TAILED JACKRABBIT

## THE SQUIRREL FAMILY

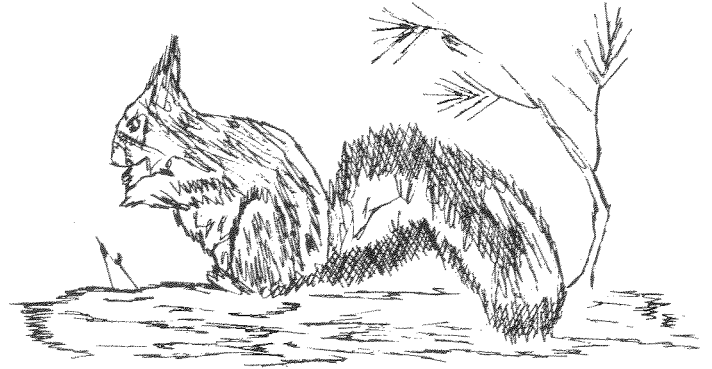
### Tree Squirrels

Several types of tree-living squirrels live within the forests of New Mexico's mountains. Included are the red squirrel (pine squirrel or chickaree) and Abert's squirrel (tassel-eared squirrel). Although tree squirrels remain inactive during the coldest winter weather, none of them truly hibernate.

The red squirrel is commonly called the pine squirrel. They are energetic little squirrels and are known for their noisy chatter. Red squirrels are most commonly seen scrambling around in the branches of cone-bearing trees in New Mexico mountains. They nest both in hollows in trees and in holes in the ground.



Abert's squirrel also is called the tassel-eared squirrel because it has tufts on the ears. These squirrels live in ponderosa pine forests throughout New Mexico. Hollows in trees are used for nests. Some nests are made of leaves. Their food includes pine cone seeds, buds of pine trees and the tender bark of young pines.



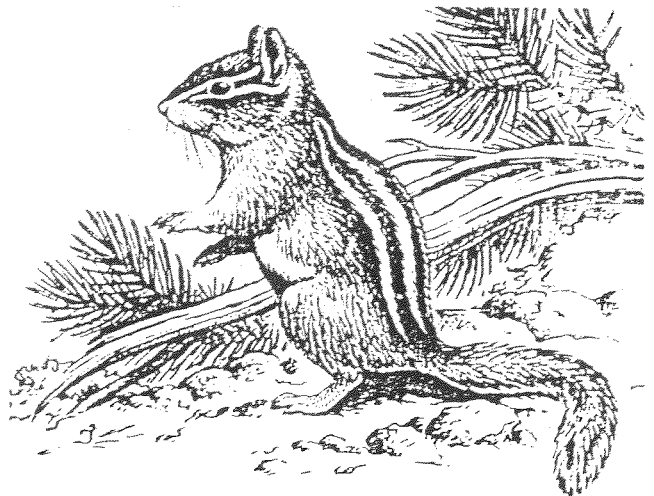
### Chipmunks

Of all the small wild animals, chipmunks are perhaps the best known. Anyone visiting the mountains of New Mexico can observe their alert and attractive behavior. If encouraged, chipmunks will come right into camp to receive food.

Chipmunks are close relatives of tree squirrels. However, chipmunks live mainly on the ground. They can be identified by the four light stripes, separated by dark stripes, running down the back, and by the stripes on the sides of the head. Their coats are reddish to grayish colored.

Because his world is full of enemies such as cats, dogs, weasels, hawks, owls and snakes, the chipmunk looks nervously at anything unusual. This may be the reason for their cautious, halting run, accompanied by slow, wavy movements of the tail.

They usually nest underground beneath a log or rocky ledge. They hibernate if winter weather is severe.



Chipmunks are busy all summer storing food such as seeds, berries, nuts and buds. Chipmunks have pouches inside their cheeks in which they carry food. They store food in small holes on the forest floor and in small storerooms in their den.

## Ground Squirrels

The habits of ground squirrels are similar to those of chipmunks, except that ground squirrels seldom climb trees. Like some other squirrels, ground squirrels cram their cheek pouches with



food then run off and store it for later eating. However, all the food stored in the summer is not for winter eating because most ground squirrels hibernate during winter.

Several types of ground squirrels live in New Mexico including the golden-mantled, 13 lined, whitetailed antelope, rock, and spotted ground squirrel.

The golden-mantled ground squirrel is probably the best known. Although commonly mistaken for a chipmunk, the golden mantled ground squirrel is larger and more brightly colored than the chipmunk. They are distinguished from chipmunks by the yellowish or copper-colored head with no stripes, and only two light stripes bordered with dark stripes on its back instead of four.

## PRAIRIE DOG

Three types of prairie dogs are found in New Mexico, including black-tailed, Gunnison's and white-tailed prairie dogs. The most common is the black-tailed prairie dog.

The black-tail is a medium-sized, ground-living member of the squirrel family. It has a long tail with a black tip and a reddish brown coat.

The black-tailed prairie dog lives in the prairie regions of eastern New Mexico. As many as a thousand prairie dogs may live together in a colony called a prairie dog town. When frightened, prairie dogs bark.

The black-tail mates in late winter. Young are born blind, naked and helpless, and remain in the burrow for the first month.

Prairie dogs spend much of their time feeding on a variety of rangeland vegetation.

Many prairie dogs die each year from disease. Prairie dogs are reservoirs for plague virus. Coyotes, foxes, eagles and hawks hunt them. Many large prairie dog towns have been reduced in size because of expanding land use by man.



## MARMOT

The yellow-bellied marmot is a large animal that resembles a prairie dog. They are light orangish brown. A whitish band crosses the nose area.



The marmot is found in rocky areas where vegetation is plentiful in the mountainous regions of northern New Mexico. Their burrows are usually dug into the ground under rocks. When alarmed, they quickly retreat to the safety of these burrows.

Marmots communicate with each other by a variety of methods, including whistles and screams. The position of the tail also may act as a means of communication.

Marmots hibernate during winter and reappear in spring. Young are born naked, blind and helpless, and remain in the burrow for about one month. They grow fast and may be almost as large as adults by the end of summer.

## PORCUPINE

Like the skunk, the porcupine is one of the few New Mexico animals born with a ready-made defense against enemies. The porky waddles slowly along the ground on short legs, and appears to be easy prey for any meat-eater it runs into. However, if startled by an enemy, the porcupine can slap and lash his quill-bearing tail to drive needlesharp quills into the mouth and skin of the attacker, causing intense pain. Tips of the quills are barbed and only a strong pull with pliers will remove them from the attacker's body. Quills are lightweight and serve as a life-jacket when the porcupine crosses streams.



Porcupine dens are found in rocky ledges, and in hollow trees and logs. Porcupines sometimes damage trees because they like to eat the sweet layer under the tree's outer bark. They also eat pine needles and other vegetation.

Although porcupines seem slow, clumsy and rather dull, they like to play, not only with each other, but with objects such as pine cones and sticks.









