

Between a Rock and a Hard Sky

Ken Cable

It may have been the dim light of dusk, but I didn't see them until the whirl of their wings drew my attention. I was sitting on my terrace one April evening a few years ago, looking down at the new garden I had just planted on the vacant property below our house. The sun had dropped behind the Ortega's and it took a moment to spot them in the fading light. It was a pair of California quail. Quail always land in a rush and dissipate their momentum by walking rapidly forward. These two did exactly that, stopping eight or ten feet from a washtub size rock jutting at an angle from the ground.



We live on a hillside overlooking a lake. Our vacant lot below is a micro wilderness visited often by a wide variety of birds and animals. I claim some of them as my pets. I have simplified keeping wild creatures as pets by leaving them in the wild. This way they care for themselves leaving me to enjoy them at my leisure and freeing them from having to live in confinement.

The quail began to peck randomly in the dry grass for seeds, their topknots bobbing as they moved. Suddenly, the male struck an alert posture and turned his head in all directions. In seconds the female ducked under the jutting rock and disappeared. She was *nesting* under that rock.

With his mate safely out of sight, the little rooster moved up the hill until he was 20 or so feet away from the nest site. Then he exploded from the ground and disappeared between two houses. At that moment the rock became a sanctuary, a place where my pet quail had set up housekeeping. A close eye would be kept upon it. No trespassing!

Quail are astonishing for their ability to suddenly appear, and then disappear while you are watching. It's useless to look for them in the sky for they are rarely seen there, unless they are flushed, and then only so long as it takes to navigate to

some safe place. In the spring it is pleasant to sit on the terrace and hear the cocks calling from a tree, a roof top or a garden post. But once mated, they seem to pipe down and get on with their business. From then on, spotting them is largely a matter of chance.

But my pair had been discovered, and I knew where to look. Each evening, when I was home, I would watch the rock at sundown. And sure enough, in they would come, repeating the ritual – she ducking under the rock and he careening off into the twilight between the houses to roost in some safe place.

Then one night things changed. The pair got home later than usual. The red-gold light of sunset had faded to a dull and washed out sky. The little hen ducked under her rock and her consort moved alertly up the hill. He bobbed his head a time or two, burst from the ground – and flew directly into the white stuccoed wall of the house in front of him. I clearly heard the thump he made and feared the worst. But the bird was made of sterner stuff. He bounced back from the wall, stayed in the air, and, in staggering flight, got to the roof edge of the next house. He settled there, head down, tipped slightly forward onto his beak.

I watched until the light was gone, and then, by flashlight, I saw that he, too, was gone. Dead on the ground, I thought. Too bad.

I watched the next evening to see if the hen would return. She did. And so did he. He made it! I watched the familiar ritual. Each pecked about until the hen drew near the rock. Quickly she ducked under it and was gone. He abandoned his alert stance, walked up the hill some twenty feet – and stopped, seeming to stare at the house in front of him. Then he turned abruptly, scooted down the hill, past the nest rock, stopping some fifteen or twenty feet below it. After looking about, he took off and flew into a tree further *down* the hill in another neighbor's yard.

I soon left on a trip and when I returned two weeks later there was no sign of the quail. I examined the rock and discovered a small hollow well protected underneath. Broken eggshell littered the nest and the ground nearby. The chicks had hatched and were gone. *But not for long.*

I next saw the quail in my garden when the young were half grown. I saw them again in August, full-sized and feeding in a covey of nineteen or twenty birds. This small covey seemed to be made up of chicks from my pair and another pair that I believe may have nested in a tangle of roses and rosemary at the edge of a neighbor's yard down the hill.

In all the years we've lived in Canyon Lake, sighting quail had been a common occurrence. Their familiar calls competed with a mocking bird's solo concert and the clamor of house finches arguing over nest sites. But not this year. In spring and summer I've always been able to see their ghost-grey forms scurrying from bush to bramble, or scratching for seeds in the dry grass. I haven't seen – or heard – any so far this spring. People living along the wild edges of Canyon Lake

may still be entertained by these beautiful birds, but they seem to be gone from my neighborhood. It may be that as our community continues to build out, they have found it too difficult to maneuver around the obstacles in their flight paths. Or, maybe they've just checked into a different vacant lot. Anyway, I'm keeping an eye on the red rock. Just in case.

Ken Cable is a nature and travel writer. His new novel "Lost!" about three young boys attempting to survive a spring blizzard in the high Sierras, is due out this fall. You can contact him at Ken@readerpublishing.com