

Morning View Kentucky
28 November 1956

Hello Mr. McCarthy,

The other morning, blinking through snowflakes that rode wildly down a bitter wind, I stood watching a covey of quail build their wheel. They were comfortably full of grain I had heaped at one of the feeder spots, and now they wished to take cover for an hour or two. Lead by my particular friend Mr. Wheat, they wandered with their delightful stop-and-go pace some fifty feet from the food to the shelter of low brush.

This year's youngsters still scooted about like water bugs while Mr. Wheat started what would soon be a solid disk of birds. He found just the right spot, made little motions with his feet oddly similar to the first few reaching strokes of a person learning to skate, then settled on the snow, looking like a plump little boat headed almost due west -- about 270 degrees. Presently another older bird settled some inches away, facing about 110 degrees, their relative positions seeming purely haphazard, not part of a pattern at all. The others moved in more rapidly now, and as they filled the gap between the two and continued past them, the perfect circle of birds appeared, all shoulder to shoulder, all facing outward. The wheel seemed complete with two youngsters left over, but they confidently trampled on the backs of the others, found invisible gaps, and snugly fitted into them. Snow was already drifting over Mr. Wheat's back and in a few moments they blurred into obscurity.

It is never winter inside the quilted down of my storm coat, but nothing has yet been invented which will keep my feet from getting cold, so I retreated homeward, remembering with glee as I walked, an incident involving Mr. Wheat and one of your quail last June.

Incidentally, I refuse to believe that a bird of the intelligence of a quail goes around shouting such meaningless foolishness as "Bob White." To my ear they call "Oh Wheat." A whistled Bob White brings silence or a disinterested reply from Mr. Wheat; but if I call H'lo Wheat, he will shout back happily.

Though gregarious and gathered into coveys during fall and winter, quail, when they have divided up into pairs during the spring nesting season, stake out a section of land as their own and guard it furiously. When the female is on the nest, the male prefers to spend most of his time standing guard on the low branch of a tree, if one is not too far away. Mr. Wheat is most wily. Each spring he somehow persuades his mate to nest in the edge of the pond-field near the tree patch, so that his guarding branch is on a tree at whose base is a feeder, and which is not more than fifty feet from the house.

They walk from the nest to the feeder together in the morning and he stands