

The Painted Buttonquail

One of the rewards of aviculture is that it provides an excellent opportunity to observe closely the habits and behavior of species which are little known or studied in the wild because of their secretive lifestyles. This is why I keep buttonquails, for only in captivity can the intriguing, almost bizarre breeding behavior of these attractive birds be monitored.

Turnix varia

Secretive Habits Revealed in the Aviary

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Perusal of the early avicultural literature reveals that in the past buttonquails were fairly common in aviaries in Britain and Europe, but my inquiries suggest that at present there are few birds in private collections outside Australia. That is disappointing for they are excellent aviary birds.

Buttonquails or hemipodes are small to medium-sized, ground-dwelling birds with a strong resemblance to the



Photo by Cyril Laubscher

A male Painted Buttonquail *Turnix varia* cautiously approaches the nest.

Coturnix quails, the best known of which are the Chinese Painted Quail *C. chinensis* and the domesticated Japanese Quail *C. coturnix*. Indeed, close inspection is needed to detect the two visual distinguishing features of buttonquails, namely the absence of a hind toe and their reversed sexual dimorphism, with females being larger and more brightly colored than males.

Relationships of these quail-like birds remain uncertain, and recent biochemical analyses suggest that they are distant from all other birds, though it is not clear whether they are an ancient lineage or a more recent one that has evolved rapidly. All species have cryptically-colored upperparts featuring a mottling of grey or brown as in *Coturnix* quails, but the head and underparts often are delicately marked with black and white or richly suffused with bright rufous tones. They are widely dispersed in the Old World, occurring in Africa, the Mediterranean region, and southern Asia to South-East Asia and Australia. All but one aberrant African species belong to the genus *Turnix*.

Seven of the 16 species occur in Australia, all but two species being endemic, and although not held in large numbers, a few species are established in Australian collections. I hold two of the larger species in my aviaries and have been quite successful in breeding the Painted Buttonquail *Turnix varia*.

This species is about twice the size of the Chinese Painted Quail and is predominantly greyish in color with rich rufous on the hindneck to shoulders and sides of the breast. It is native to the forests and woodlands of coastal and subcoastal eastern and south-western Australia up to about 800 m (2,600 feet) above sea level. It is common on my property, and wild males regularly are attracted to my aviaries when the captive females are vocalising during courtship; four or five males often can be seen running back and forth in front of the aviary avidly seeking an entrance opening.

I have two breeding females, and they behave quite differently when nesting. One is atypical in that she participates equally in rearing of the chicks, and is permanently paired to



Distribution of the Painted Buttonquail
Turnix varia.

the same male. When the chicks hatch, one or two go with each parent and are reared to independence by that parent.

The second female behaves as a normal buttonquail, being interested only in courtship, copulation and egg-laying. She will coax the brooding male to leave the nest by continuing to display to him, and immediately will kill newly-hatched chicks. She is paired alternatively with two males in adjoining aviaries, being transferred to the second aviary as soon as the first male commences incubation, and then in turn to a holding aviary after the second male commences to incubate. She is returned to the first aviary after the independent young have been removed, and normally mates again with both males in turn, producing a total of four clutches in a season.

To attract males to her territory, the female gives a loud, pigeon-like booming call, and this signals the commencement of the breeding season. She displays to the male by puffing out feathers of the chest, raising the tail and circling him while booming loudly and scratching the ground. If receptive, a male may be offered food by the female as a prelude to copulation. The female selects the nest-site, usually a slight depression in the ground beside a

grass tussock, rock or log, and then builds the slightly dome-shaped nest with fine grasses, leaves and twigs. At intervals of 24 to 48 hours, she lays the 3 to 5 eggs, which are buff to greyish-white with speckles and spots of red-brown or dull violet to black.

Incubation by the male lasts approximately 14 days, and commences after completion of the clutch. The cryptically-colored, downy chicks leave the nest almost immediately after hatching, and follow the male in much the same manner as do young *Coturnix* quails, but there the similarity ends, for young buttonquails are fed bill to bill by the male for the first 8 to 10 days, and they take only live insects. Growth of the chicks is rapid, and at about 10 days, although only partly feathered, they can fly! Seeds are included in the diet after about 15 days, when they are independent, and at approximately 25 days they are the same size as adults.

In the wild, Painted Buttonquails feed extensively on insects gleaned from leaf litter and loose soil on the forest floor, their peculiar circular scratching motions leaving telltale rounded depressions or platelets in the ground. Leaf litter covers the floors of my aviaries and is replenished frequently, thereby renewing the supply of insects, and the birds spend much time digging and scratching in this litter. They are supplied also with an artificial insectivorous mix, to which termites or small mealworms are added when chicks are being reared. The basic seed mix comprises 2 parts white (French) millet, 1 part plain canary seed, 1 part red millet, and 1 part panicum.

Being less timid than other species, and being active throughout much of the day, Painted Buttonquails add interest and variety to a mixed collection. They should be housed in a well-planted aviary, where shelter and suitable nest-sites are available under grass tussocks or shrubs, and they do not interfere with other birds, so can be held with finches, softbills, pigeons or doves, and small parrots. I presume that the Common Buttonquail *Turnix sylvatica* and the Barred Buttonquail *T. suscitator*, which are the species most commonly kept outside Australia, are similarly suited to aviaries, and keeping them would be equally as interesting. 