

The Miniature Game Bird... Button Quail

by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

When you hear the term "game bird" what pictures come to mind? Do you see a gaggle of geese? Do you envision a pheasant standing stark still among tall grass? How about a flock of ducks winging their way southward for the winter? These are certainly normal images. But what about the person who sees a bumble-bee sized creature scampering across the floor of a brooder, kicking up sand and turkey starter, rolling about like a minuscule dust ball? Does that person need a psychiatrist? No. More than likely that person, like me, has discovered a miniature among the game bird family — the Philippine or "button quail."

Button quail are not included in a good many birdrooms and aviaries. The reasons may vary. But my bet is that people simply haven't seen the species or they would want to keep a pair or two for their enjoyment. True, they don't boast ornate feathering or brilliant plumage. But these tiny specimens have attractive "natural" hues which many aviarists find appealing.

Button quail are compact little creatures, measuring little more than four-and-one-quarter inches at maturity. They seem to have abundant energy, scampering non-stop, keeping close watch over their domain, whether it be the floor of a canary cage or a large walk-in aviary. The normal cock is a subtle blending of brown, slate and burgundy tones, with a distinct black and white collar extending from the nostrils to just below the eyes. The hen is a similar blending of browns minus the collar. In addition to normals, a silver variety is quite easily obtained, with sexing again an easy process due to the cock's striped bib beneath the beak.

My first encounter with these tiny game birds was about four years ago. I don't believe I'd ever seen button quail before noticing a trio (two hens and a cock) at a local pet shop. They were, according to the shop manager, perfect floor birds, cleaning up the wasted seeds which finches, canaries and parakeets are notorious for scattering. I purchased the trio for \$35 and housed them with several ringneck doves. The birds got along amicably. Though I've never tried it, I have heard that buttons also make excellent roommates for cockatiels and parakeets, preferring to

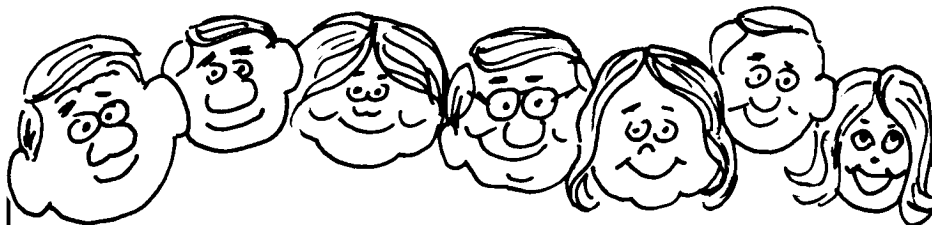
fight only among others of their species. This last statement can be proven by allowing more than one mated pair of button quail to share a particular housing arrangement. Immediately, the cocks will become quite aggressive in their need to establish dominance. Thus, it is wise to keep mated quail in separate enclosures unless adequate sanctuaries are provided. Like most birds, button quail enjoy a certain amount of seclusion. This can be provided through inclusion of artificial leaves wired in place, or a hollowed out log and some dried moss. The more natural their environment, the more readily they will establish a nest and breed.

What can you expect after your mated pair have decided to set up housekeeping? Well, for one thing, you can expect lots of olive green eggs, speckled liberally with tiny black dots. The number of eggs may vary but it is not unlikely that a young hen will produce an egg every other day. If she's methodical the eggs may be laid at approximately the same location. Or, you may find them scattered randomly across the aviary floor. They won't make a decent omelette so you may as well consider the joy and challenge of

raising the birds. True, I have heard of breeders who have used the quail hen to incubate for the necessary 17-19 day ordeal but if they are successful, the hatches had to be minimal as a button quail hen cannot successfully hover more than six eggs. If you really want to raise buttons, an incubator is a surer road to satisfactory production.

Artificial incubation doesn't require that you spend a fortune on fancy equipment. There are many small incubators which will do a great job for you and will more than pay for your initial cash outlay. It doesn't matter how good your unit is, however, if your eggs aren't fresh. For this reason it is wise to collect and store the eggs for no longer than ten days at a temperature between 50 and 65 degrees. I recommend a garage or cellar if you happen to have one. The eggs should be placed in a regular egg carton and kept in a horizontal position. Turning the eggs twice a day is vital to proper development of the embryo.

While the eggs are being stored, it is a good idea to start experimenting with your incubator. Run it a few days prior to introducing the eggs just to be certain that you have established the proper temperature and humidity readings. Now, if you have purchased a forced-air



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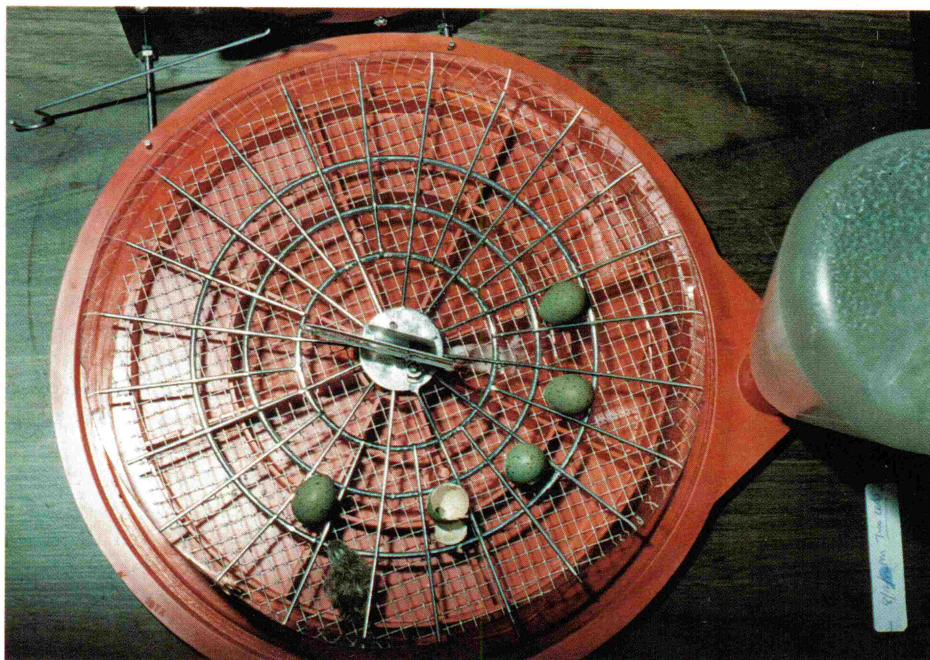
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unit, you will need to maintain a temperature of approximately 99.5°. The relative humidity should be about 60% or approximately an 87 to 88 wet bulb reading. For those who have a still air model, the temperature should be kept very close to 102 degrees. The eggs should be turned about three to four times daily until the final 60-72 hours prior to hatch. At this time it is not wise to disturb the eggs since the chick within may become confused and position itself incorrectly for pipping. It is likely that the chicks will emerge from their shells by the 18th or 19th day. They should not be removed from the incubator until they have fully dried and fluffed out. A full 12 hours is a good time period allowing the youngsters to gain strength before transferring them to a brooder.

There is nothing so adorable as a newly hatched button quail, so small an



The first button quail chick emerges after 19 days in a forced-air incubator.



These two chicks are completely dried and fluffed out. They are ready to go into the brooder at 12 hours of age.



A silver variety button quail hen.

*A normal cock
and his mate survey
some cucumber.*

avian representative, and yet so independent. With just a few precautions, the creatures will grow and develop at an astounding rate.

First, brooding temperature is critical. The brooder should be kept at approximately 96 degrees for the first week and lowered very gradually (no more than a degree or two at a time) over the next two to three weeks. By the time the chicks have achieved some growth and have feathered out they will survive easily at room temperature. Never transfer the youngsters to a garage or outdoor flight until they are mature and the weather is mild.

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Photos by Steve Holden, Vancouver, Washington

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Next, a good beginning diet is essential. I use a combination of game bird starter, crushed, dried greens and petamine. After a few weeks I switch from game bird starter to a chemical free chicken starter because the chicks need less heat. Whatever you use, the mixture must be pulverized into a powder. Scatter it liberally over a layer of clean soil or sand. Be sure to keep the brooder floor clean, changing the ground cover as often as necessary.

Providing drink is more of a challenge, since tiny quail hatchlings can drown very easily in the smallest amount of water. To ensure that the chicks don't meet with a watery grave, I fill a mason jar lid with marbles and cover them with vitamin water.

In less than two months the quail will be nearly the size of their parents. Only the sleeker body lines will give them away. Males will have developed the telltale bib and mating will be probable by the time they have reached three months. In order to keep adults looking and feeling their best it is a good idea to supplement their diets with high protein items like mealworms and other small insects. The basis of their adult diet will, of course, be finch mix. And they, like many other cage-birds, will relish a variety of greens. Cucumbers and leaf lettuce are extremely popular. Some fruits, especially melons and tomato, will prove appealing as well.

By the time you have successfully reared your first quail, you will probably understand the charm of these creatures. Undoubtedly, you'll want to continue to keep a few around even when you have sold the others to pet shops or fellow bird enthusiasts. Always be sure to freshen the bloodline occasionally, as too much inbreeding may lead to higher mortalities and crippled chicks.

There's something delightful about keeping a bird that doesn't sing or talk or whistle upon command. A button quail's call can be beautifully wistful. It can make you feel closer to the heart of things. It can give you a whole new image at the mere mention of the term "game bird."

Note: My first brooder was a home-built job — a wooden box with a light bulb for heat. Even this crude model did a more than adequate job for the necessary few weeks it takes to acclimate chicks to normal room temperatures. Many basic game bird management books offer building plans for your own brooder project if you don't wish to buy a commercial unit. 

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