

# KEEPING THE LITTLE BUTTON QUAIL

by Daniel Patterson



LITTLE BUTTON QUAIL PAIR  
Hen on left

To some, quail are just little birds that run around on the cage floor, picking up the scraps and spilt seed. Most bird-keepers are familiar with the King Quail, *Coturnix chinensis*, and we have probably all kept a few of these at some stage. But there is a wonderful variety of other quail species available to the aviculturist, with some interesting behaviours and characteristics that make them both a challenge and a pleasure to keep and breed.

After having King Quail for many years, I decided to try something a bit different. I had always wanted Black-breasted Button Quail or Painted Button Quail, but was afraid my aviaries weren't spacious enough for these larger species. So I chose the Little Button Quail, *Turnix velox*.

I started with a pair purchased from a dealer. These two settled in well and I kept a close watch for any breeding activity. But, four months later I found the male dead in the corner. The hen was snuggled up alongside and there wasn't a mark on him, so I assume it was just a case of 'old age'. No nesting attempt had been made. I searched for months to locate another cock, with no luck. Just when I thought I wouldn't find another male, I received an unexpected phone call and a one year old pair of buttons were mine!

This pair had laid eggs but not hatched chicks. They had been housed in a huge 'desert theme' aviary, along with finches and small parrots, but, also, with a pair of Spinifex Pigeons, *Geophaps plumifera*. The owner was selling them because the buttons were far too aggressive towards the pigeons! (You have to smile when you think of the size difference.)

The new pair were moved to my 3 x 3m finch aviary and, to my surprise, three weeks later I discovered the cock sitting on a nest of brown speckled eggs amongst the Veldt grass. Following the advice in all the books, I removed the hen, and thirteen days later dad was proudly leading two of the cutest, little fluffy chicks around the aviary floor. The chicks grew incredibly fast under his care and were removed



NEST AND EGGS



THE MALE SITS TIGHTLY FOR 13 DAYS

when fully feathered at three weeks old. The hen was re-introduced and not four weeks later he was incubating eggs again.

The Little Button is similar in size to the King Quail and is one of Australia's smallest *Turnix* quail, hailing from the dry grasslands across the interior. It is a highly nomadic species, breeding up rapidly in times of good rainfall and dispersing again when conditions are tough. Similarly, in captivity, their availability varies. Sometimes they won't be seen for ages, then, suddenly, numbers of young birds become available. Spare cock birds are always in short supply.

All button quail have an unusual breeding behaviour whereby the role of the sexes are reversed. The female is the dominant bird, and is larger and more colourful than the male. She is also polyandrous, courting and mating with more than one male in a season, and plays no part in hatching or rearing her offspring.

With non-breeding birds, differentiating the sexes can be tricky, especially if two of the same sex are held together, but females are, overall, a more rusty-buff colour, particularly around the head, neck and sides of the breast.

In captivity, Little Buttons are easy to house. They are generally compatible with finches, small parrots, doves and softbills. However, they must be the only ground-dwelling species in the aviary. A dry, sheltered aviary with a sandy floor, and either living or dried grasses is essential. All quail require some sort of ground-cover for both security and nest sites. In bare aviaries, quail become flighty, little rockets resulting in scalped heads or possibly worse. My aviaries housing the Little Buttons are planted with Guinea Palm grass, Johnson grass and Veldt grass, as well as a light covering of leaf litter.

Little Button quail are basically a seed eater. A mixture of millets and an egg & biscuit meal should make up the basic diet, but live-food will be greedily consumed, especially when breeding.

Little Buttons are less territorial than their larger cousins and may be kept as a trio (1 female to two males), but are generally less trouble when kept as single pairs. Multiple males can be kept in separate aviaries and the female rotated among them. Once a clutch is laid and the male begins incubation, the hen can be moved on to the next customer. This leaves the male undisturbed to sit on the eggs and rear the young alone.

Some females may be left with the sitting male, but button quail can be unpredictable, aggressive birds and it's usually best practice to remove females to prevent the chicks from possibly being attacked and killed. When introducing new pairs, always introduce the hen into the cock's territory, never *vice-versa*, and watch for any sign of aggression from the hen.

If conditions are suitable a compatible pair will breed at any time of the year. The female calls in a low, moaning 'oom' as part of her display to the male. Little Buttons like to nest at the base of a grass clump, making a neat depression lined with fine grass and small leaves. *Turnix* quail lay a smaller clutch than *Coturnix* species, three to five eggs being normal. When the chicks have hatched the male will neatly replace the shell-ends inside the empty shells and wander off with his little family.

The chicks are tiny, brown-striped, fluff-balls and, like all young quail, are prone to all sorts of accidents, such as drowning and becoming lost in the aviary grasses. To prevent drowning, I raise the usual water dish on bricks and provide a shallower dish at ground level for the first ten days. They are also quite capable of squeezing through half inch mesh, so a metal barrier must surround the base of the aviary perimeter.

The male is a very attentive parent and keeps his brood close at all times. He will also bill-feed the young and it is a delight to see dad quail offering the chicks a juicy mealworm from his beak. The young feather rapidly and are independent within three to four weeks. Once the young are removed, the female can be returned to the male's aviary and the breeding cycle begin again. The young, in turn, can breed at three to four months of age.

The Little Button Quail is a hardy, relatively simple quail to keep in captivity, and under the right conditions will readily breed. So if you want to try something different to the plain, old King Quail, then I can recommend giving the Little Button a go.

All photos by the author

