

# EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

## #27 HIMALAYAN QUAIL



The Himalayan Quail  
or "Eyebrowed Rollulus"  
A painting by Edward Lear in Gray's  
"Gleanings from the Menagerie and  
Aviary at Knowsley Hall\*\*"  
of 1846

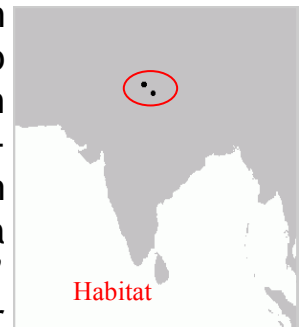
The Himalayan Quail, *Ophrysia superciliosa* was a medium-sized quail belonging to the pheasant family, that was last reliably recorded in 1876. It was only observed in two locations in the western Himalayas in Uttarakhand, north-west India. There are few known specimens.

The reddish bill and legs of this small dark quail and the white spots before and after the eye made it distinctive. The male was dark grey with black streaks and a white forehead and supercilium\*\*. The female had a brownish body with dark streaks and a greyish brow. Like the

male there was a white spot in front of the eye and a larger one behind. Both sexes had long tail coverts and the ten feathered tail was longer, nearly as long as the wing, than in most quail. The feathers of the forehead were bristly and stiff. The species was most commonly found in coveys of five or six, and only flew when flushed at close quarters. The genus name is derived from *Ophrys* which refers to the brow.

The preferred habitat was steep hillsides covered with long grass.

The species was described by J. E. Gray in 1846 from living specimens in the collection of the Earl of Derby at Knowsley Hall, the locality he gave was "India" with a query. In 1865 Kenneth Mackinnon shot a pair in November, in a hollow between Budraj and Benog, behind Mussoorie, at about 1800m (6,000 feet) elevation. Two years later, again in November, five specimens were obtained by a group near Jerepani. In December 1876, Major G. Carwithen obtained a specimen from the eastern slopes of Sher-kadanda, close to Nainital, at an elevation of 2100m (7,000 feet). It has been suggested that this was a migratory bird, arriving in winter, although the species' short wings make this somewhat doubtful. The birds near Mussoorie, as observed by Hutton and others, occurred in small coveys of six to ten, that kept to high grass and scrub, fed on grass seeds, were difficult to flush, and had a shrill whistling note when flushed. They arrived about November, and stayed until June, after which they disappeared.



Map: L. Shyamal

\* Knowsley Park, near Liverpool, was founded by Edward Stanley, 13th Earl of Derby, and was one of the largest private menageries in Victorian England.

\*\* the arch above the eyes.

Specimens are known from:

- Uttar Pradesh Mussoorie (1836, 2 specimens, type locality)
- 5 km to the north-west of Mussorie, between Badraj and Benog, 1,850 metres (November 1865, 1 specimen, 1 lost)
- Jhuripani, 5 km to the south of Mussorie, c.1,650 m (November - June 1867/68 or 1896/70, 4 specimens total)
- Eastern slopes of Sher-ka-danda near Nainital, 2,100 metres (December 1876, 1 specimen).

There are unconfirmed records from:

- Dailekh district of Nepal (circumstantial, 1952)
- East Kumaon near Lohagat village (circumstantial, 1952)
- Jhuripani (seen, 1970)
- Near Suwakholi in the Mussoorie hills (seen, late 1970s, 1984)
- North-eastern India? (seen, 1993)
- Nainital, Kumaon Hills (seen, 2003).

In 1952 the noted American ornithologist, Sidney Dillon Ripley, recorded a local bird name *sano kalo titra* ("small black/dusky partridge") from the Dailekh district of Nepal. The only bird from the general area that seems to fit such a description would be a male Himalayan Quail.



A poorly coloured illustration from Hume and Marshall, "Game birds of India, Burmah and Ceylon" 1880

Recent Indian records seem unlikely given that the area is well populated, the habitat extensively altered by human activity, and recent surveys have not located birds. Tourism is a key economic factor of the region, so it seems unlikely that these birds could escape the eyes of observers. However there is no evidence and the habitat available here is no longer suitable due to the population pressure. The early 1990s "sightings" seem to have been based on a misidentification; the habitat type in the area in

question is different (conifer forest) anyway.

Judging from the species' known distribution and habitat requirements, it is entirely possible that it was present in Nepal too, or even still is. As most of the local population is vegetarian for religious reasons and habitat destruction has not been as pronounced as in neighbouring India, Western Nepal is the most likely place for a remnant population of the Himalayan Quail to exist today. However, due to Ripley's reference only coming to attention a few years ago and the district being a common scene of clashes during the Nepalese Civil War and thus not safe for foreigners, there has been no attempt to follow up on this record. If it still exists there it is probably not under immediate threat of extinction.

R.V.C with help from Wikipedia