

QUAIL...A VALUABLE ADDITION TO ANY AVIARY

5 THE BLACK-BREASTED BUTTONQUAIL

Turnix melanogaster



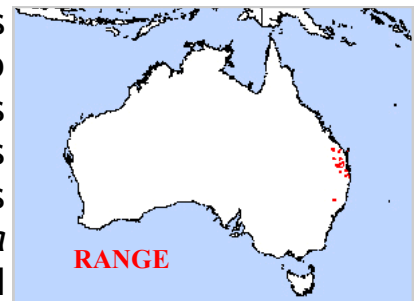
Photo: "Aviceda"

The Black-breasted Buttonquail is a rare endemic of eastern Australia, where it is usually found in rainforest. Like other buttonquail, it is unrelated to the true quail. Both sexes have marbled black, rufous, pale brown and white plumage, but the female is larger than the male and has a more extensive black face and chin.

This species was originally described by the British ornithologist John Gould in 1837. Its specific epithet is derived from the Ancient Greek terms "*melano*" - black, and "*gaster*" belly. The Black-breasted was originally placed in the order Gruiformes, but recent molecular analysis shows it belongs to an ancient lineage of shorebirds (Charadriiformes).

This is a plump bird of predominantly marbled black, rufous and pale brown, prominently marked with white spots and stripes. As is the case with the other buttonquail, the female is larger and more distinctively coloured than the male. Measuring up to 20cm (8"), she has a black face and chin, dotted with fine white markings. The smaller male measures up to 19cm (7½") and lacks the black markings.

The range of the Black-breasted Buttonquail is from Hervey Bay in central Queensland south to the north-eastern corner of New South Wales. It is rare and its habitat fragmented. It frequents rainforest and nearby areas, as well as Hoop Pine, *Araucaria cunninghamii*, plantations, and lantana thickets.



HOOP PINE

Photo: Robert Whyte

The incubation and parenting roles are reversed in the buttonquail genus, as the larger and more brightly coloured female mates with multiple partners, which she attracts with a low-pitched *oom* call. She then leaves them to incubate the eggs of the one or two clutches that are raised each year. The nest is a shallow depression scraped out of the leaf litter and ground, and lined with dried vegetation. The three or four shiny grey-white or buffish eggs, splotched with dark brown-black and lavender, laid measure approximately 28mm x 23mm.

The Black-breasted Buttonquail is currently classified as *vulnerable* on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Most of this Buttonquail's original habitat has been cleared and the remaining populations are fragmented. It has been estimated that just five thousand breeding birds remain in the wild and that this number is declining. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that aviculturists holding this species make a concentrated effort to increase the numbers to ensure that this interesting species doesn't become extinct.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia

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In the following article the Black-breasted Buttonquail is referred to as the "Black-breasted Quail" the name by which it was most commonly known at the time.

WAYS OF INCREASING THE NUMBERS OF BLACK-BREASTED QUAIL

Turnix melanogaster

By T. Jolly¹

From the SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVICULTURAL MAGAZINE² Volume 1, N° 1, February 1958

It is surprising how the unexpected can happen, even in the acquiring of a species of quail. In a showcase of mounted birds I bought some years ago there is a specimen of the Black-breasted Quail, and of this I learned a little later that it was thought to be the only skin in South Australia. Much value was placed on this when learned that the Adelaide Museum was not in possession of a skin of this species of quail. Furthermore, according to reports, these birds were thought to be extinct, so it can be imagined the joy in the aviculturists' camp when a few pairs of these birds were captured and eventually landed in Adelaide. Of these one pair soon settled down and proved that it was possible to breed them in captivity. For this achievement the Society's bronze medal was awarded for a first breeding achievement³.

A little later I was fortunate enough to be the possessor of a pair, and soon the hen was doing her share: eggs were being laid all over the floor of the aviary. Unfortunately I did not keep a true record of the exact number of eggs laid, but I should say to date (January 1958) this season I have collected anything up to three dozen. Occasionally a nice nest is constructed, and this is similar to that of other species of the Turnix group, usually a depression in the ground, lined and finished with a domed top. The greatest number of eggs ever laid in a completed nest so far has been two; others, as mentioned earlier, being laid anywhere but in the nest.

¹Tom Jolly, a Life Member of the Society, passed away in the late 1970s.

²the original name of BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA.

³Mr. H.J. Hutchinson of Athelstone was the recipient of this medal in 1957.

The aviary in which this particular pair of quail is housed is 21ft. X 6ft. X 6ft. (6.4m X 1.8m X 1.8m), and sharing this is a collection of Australian and foreign finches.

After having picked up quite a number of eggs I hit on the idea of changing a clutch of Painted Quail⁴ eggs for Black-breasted, as it as apparent the cock Black-breasted was not in the least interested in settling down to incubation.

Perhaps at this juncture some detail of their habits, that is the habits of the Turnix group, may be appropriate. The hen builds the nest, and when this is completed commences laying, usually a clutch of four eggs. From there the cock bird takes over and settles down to incubation duties; sits the 16 days and rears the chicks. The eggs of the Black-breasted Quail are slightly larger than those of the Painted Quail, but similar in colour and markings. I selected four eggs and took the precaution of taking the chill off these before placing them under the Painted so as not to give any indication that a switch had been made. Awaiting an opportunity, I eventually managed to make a switch during mid-afternoon on a Saturday whilst the cock Painted was off the nest for a short period to feed. Having made the change I now hoped for the best.

Well the best did not happen. However, the result was encouraging enough to warrant this article being written, and the following notes refer to some of the experiences I have had with these birds.

On a Sunday morning, 16 days after switching the eggs, I was feeding the birds in an adjacent aviary to where the Painted Quail was sitting, and image my surprise when the cock walked off the nest and left exposed to my gaze two Black-breasted chicks. This was most pleasing, and on observation my first impression was that one of these was bigger than its nest mate. This proved to be correct, and the same until they reached maturity, when it was easily seen that they were a pair.

The size of the aviary these chicks were hatched in is 18ft. X 12ft. X 6ft. (5.5m X 3.65m X 1.8m), and after three or four days the father and chicks were moved to another aviary. This was done for a purpose, as I wanted to try and experiment with another pair of Painted. Whilst in the larger aviary the chicks had access to white ants, but after shifting them to the smaller aviary they thrived off the floor, with the addition of several mealworms night and morning. The reason for rearing the chicks in this particular aviary was that this being only eight feet (2.4m) from the back door, I had in mind several Painted Quail that had been reared in this previously. These became very tame and quiet, and would eat mealworms out of the hand when offered. My theory proved correct, with the Black-breasted, and now

⁴*Turnix varius*

that they are adult birds, a noise on the door and a call will bring them running to the hand holding the mealworms. This is most pleasing, and several members of the Society have had the pleasure of witnessing this scene.

A surprising feature relevant to those birds noted was the mating call of the hen. This was heard when the hen was still a very young bird. Since rearing the pair referred to in the above notes to maturity, one more has been reared from a further clutch of eggs, and this is another male. Thinking these birds would agree, I placed them in the same aviary with the first bred two birds, but only for a few minutes. The behaviour and attitude towards this bird was very aggressive, and I could see this move would have proved fatal.

I believe another member has had the fortune to rear a chick of this species by adopting the same method as that which proved successful with my foster parents. Although this may be a little unorthodox, it is certainly a way of increasing the number of the rare Black-breasted, and as time goes on maybe the aviary bred birds will be more inclined to do their own incubating. A feature relevant to these birds, and very noticeable, is that the Black-breasted is quite a deal larger than the Painted Quail, and as usual with the Turnix group, the hen is the larger bird and more colourful than the cock.

Finally, a few tips that may be of help when rearing these birds. Do not keep the floor of the aviary too clean of seed and husks; from this the birds will get quite a lot of live food. Avoid losing chicks by drowning by using shallow vessels, and deeper vessels for other birds should be high enough so as to be out of reach of the chicks.

A FURTHER NOTE ON BUTTONQUAIL

Tom's prediction proved correct, and Black-breasted Buttonquail males became easier to get to both sit and raise chicks.

Unfortunately, both the Black-breasted and Painted Buttonquail have, in recent years, become extremely difficult to obtain, as have all the members of the family. Hopefully, quail will "come back into fashion" and these species will once again be seen in reasonable numbers.

Black-breasted Buttonquail make great little "rotary hoes" in the aviary, as they are constantly turning over the ground in search of live-food. This, of course, helps keep the floor in a sanitary condition.