

# **BLACK-BREASTED BUTTON-QUAIL**

By Richard Mills

## **Introduction**

The black-breasted button-quail (*Turnix melanogaster*), usually called the black-breasted quail by aviculturists, is the largest and rarest in the button quail group.

## **Description**

The females are larger than the males, measuring 170-180mm. The female's crown is generally black with mixed blotches of brown. A line above the eye is spotted black and white with the lores black. The back and upper tail coverts are brown; collar and shoulders chestnut mottled with black and white. Chin and throat black; breast black spotted with white; belly and vent mottled grey; eye white; bill slate grey; legs and feet orange.

The male is smaller, measuring 150-160mm, is paler with very little black on the head, chin and breast but otherwise resembles the female.

Immature birds resemble the male, but the eyes are dark and legs grey.

## **Range and Distribution**

Once this species occurred along the Central Eastern Queensland coast to northern New South Wales. Early records show a population around the Atherton region and on the Eastern coast between 23° and 29°S.

Latest observations record that although its range has been greatly reduced, populations tend to be more localised and associated with introduced lantana, tobacco and plantations of hoop pine. Its ability to adapt to these man-made impoverished rainforest conditions holds it in good stead for the future.

The species appears to be present all year in a district, living in small parties of 4-5 birds in and along the edges of rainforest that is dry rather than wet. It needs dense cover overhead and a thick dry litter layer.

## **Aviary Requirements**

With the knowledge of this species' natural habitat, breeders who can reproduce similar conditions will be well pleased with its ability to breed in captivity. The birds will feel more secure in an aviary which is well planted, not only with trees and shrubs but also with a thick understorey of grass. It is essential that the greater part of the aviary floor is earth, with a covering of compost, leafy type material.

These birds feed by first scratching aside the leaves in a circular motion, pivoting on one foot, then swapping feet and reversing, picking up any seeds and insects revealed. This particular activity leaves characteristic saucer shaped depressions every time the bird forages. Consequently, the addition of scrap vegetable matter and seed dug into the compost heap will benefit these foraging birds.

The birds do enjoy wet areas under sprays, but you should keep some parts of the aviary dry where there are likely nest sites.

The black-breasted quail needs a great deal more space than the king quail, which is widely bred in corridor type aviaries. It needs areas of undergrowth in which to retreat when threatened. Otherwise, being large birds and rather clumsy flyers, they can disturb other members of your collection when they take to the air.

## **Breeding**

The black-breasted quail reaches sexual maturity at 4-5 months. The hens, at this stage, are obviously larger and darker than their mates. They advertise and display in their territory by repeated booming calls. The hen is polygamous in nature and will mate with any males she can entice into her territory. Having laid a clutch of eggs, she will leave the cock bird to incubate and rear the young as she finds another mate and repeats this procedure.

In captivity where enclosures are generally small, the hen bird is removed from the aviary. If the hen is left in she can kill the young or drive the cock off the eggs to establish another clutch elsewhere. The hen can be placed into a holding aviary situation (containing no other species of quail) or can be rotated amongst 2-3 other cock birds, again removing the hen once the cock has begun incubation.

When the hen is reintroduced back into an enclosure there is much chasing and a 'booming' chorus as the birds renew acquaintances. The hen can be quite

aggressive, seizing the cock by the back or wing feathers. Mating is very secretive as is the selection and preparation of the nest site.

Nesting will occur all year round if the conditions are right. That is, if ground temperature doesn't fall too low, and there is an abundance of cover and live food. However, the normal period is September - April.

A nest site is usually near or under a clump of grass or a low shrub. Most times it is situated in a semi-exposed site where the cock can command a view of most of the aviary floor while incubating.

The nest will be set into a depression lined with grasses and, if sufficient material is available (e.g. green seeding heads) they will build a substantial roof to the nest.

Once laying commences 2-4 large brown and fawn speckled eggs will be laid. Only when the clutch is complete will the cock begin to incubate. The cock sits very tight, feeding mainly in the morning and evenings. At 16 days the cock bird will help release the chicks from the egg by chipping a fine circular line around the egg. From this point the brown and fawn striped chicks are most difficult to observe. If the cock doesn't manage to call them away into the undergrowth in time they will freeze, flat to the ground, when disturbed. Only when you retreat do they emerge from their near perfect camouflage to answer father's call.

Live food is very important in the development of the chicks. With an abundance and variation of live food, I have found the chicks develop quickly, contrary to the text books! I feed my birds 4 main types. During the first couple of weeks, termites and very small mealworms are taken with relish, then introducing earwigs and slater beetles, which the chicks can handle once a little more developed. For the first couple of weeks the chicks are fed by the cock. He locates the food source, calls and the chicks take it directly from his beak. In my observations of many clutches of young, I have yet to witness food being regurgitated, which is a popular theory.

At 2-4 weeks the chicks become a little independent as they explore their inherited desire to scratch. They also become less shy and will, with father nearby, accept live food thrown to them.

I leave the chicks with the cock for 6-8 weeks, depending on their growth rate which relates to the number of chicks raised. Two or three chicks surviving is more common with four being raised to maturity quite rare.

Presently I am running 2 cocks (in separate enclosures) with the one hen, which has proved to be very successful. I have only had to leave the hen with a cock for a week to 10 days before another clutch is laid in each instance. This can still leave the hen unoccupied and pacing up and down a holding aviary for up to 5 weeks. With expansion on the way I will try and introduce a third cock to the breeding programme.

Sexing of the young can be done at about 8-12 weeks, again depending on growth. The hens will emerge slightly larger and will develop more black on the breast. The beaks in comparison will be slightly bigger in the hens.

When housing the young it may be necessary to separate the hens, as they may begin to drive the males to nest at an early age, even before reaching maturity or full colour.

Recently, experiments have been carried out in very large enclosures to try to establish a colony situation, comprising one hen bird and several cocks. If the hen can service 3 or so cock birds on a rotational basis she may be well occupied and thus kept out of mischief! Results to this date are not available.

In summing up I find these birds the most fascinating members of my collection. Shy at first, and when they are young, but a most interesting bird to observe when foraging for food. With live food available all year round I've found they will breed freely through all months of the year.

Considering this bird's status in the wild, and the relative ease with which they breed in captivity, it is disappointing how few of them are kept by fellow aviculturists.

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