

QUAILS IN MID-NORTHERN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

L. P. PEDLER

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The main purpose of this paper is to record large extensions of range which I have observed of Brown Quail *Coturnix ypsilophorus*, Painted Quail *Turnix varia* and possibly King Quail *Coturnix chinensis*. Notes are also included on my observations of Stubble Quail *Coturnix pectoralis* and Little Quail *Turnix velox* during the last two years, mainly on my father's mixed farming property between Koolunga and Yacka.

STUBBLE QUAIL *Coturnix pectoralis* — This species is common throughout the year in crops, stubbles and pastures and the birds seem to stay in pairs all the year round. Because of the dry season so far in 1975 (July), many Stubble Quail seem to be congregating in the remaining areas of good cover, mainly dry grass in the hills. In these areas groups of up to 12 quail are frequently flushed; but pairs reunite quickly by means of quiet calls. A few birds remain in the short pastures, roadsides and remaining stubbles. The loud three-note call is usually heard from about July to January. In the good seasons of 1973 and 1974, this species and Little Quail bred in large numbers. Numerous young Stubble Quail at all stages of growth were seen on the same dates, in crops being harvested in early December on properties north of Brinkworth. Broods seen varied from one to about nine, but most were of four or five young accompanied by both parents. This corresponds with my observations of the species breeding in a large aviary, where the female did all the incubating; but once the chicks hatched the male usually accompanied them and the female, until they were almost fully grown.

BROWN QUAIL *Coturnix ypsilophorus* — On November 8, 1974, one was heard calling frequently from the edge of a thick ripening barley crop, 7 km east of Koolunga (160 km N. of Adelaide). The call, repeated a few times every five or ten minutes for most of the day from the same spot, was a loud mournful whistle, rising in pitch towards the end and usually preceded by a similar but shorter, softer note. After many attempts to locate it, the bird was flushed in the late afternoon, showing that it was a quail a little smaller than a Stubble Quail, and appearing evenly coloured brown all over as it flew away. A similar call was heard twice during January,

1975, 1 km north of the previous locality, in long grass and weeds at the edge of the Broughton River, near a spot known locally as White Cliff. One Brown Quail was flushed there on April 29, 1975, and on May 10 two were flushed together near the same place. On both occasions the birds were seen as they flew away to dense tangled rushes *Juncus pallidus* in a swampy area near the river. As in the first sighting, the birds were only about 1 metre away and in the path of the observer before they flew, again appearing evenly brown all over and darker than a Stubble Quail.

A better view was obtained when two quail were again flushed at White Cliff on May 24, and one of them landed only 15 metres away on almost bare ground. It sat still for some time, then ran a few metres to cover. The quail's upperparts were dark mottled grey-brown, sparsely streaked with narrow pale lines. Its undersides were paler brown and barred with narrow black markings. The eye was reddish-brown and the beak dark blue-grey. On being disturbed again it flew 60 metres to the river edge, gliding the last half on wings held flat and at right angles to the body. When the quail ran, a call similar to that given by running Stubble Quail was heard, and when flushed the birds rose with a loud whirr of wings, sometimes giving squeaky chirping calls in flight.

Three Brown Quail were flushed together on June 21 and again on July 2 from rushes at White Cliff. Other species in this habitat are Little Grassbirds *Megalurus gramineus*, which are common. In 1975, Banded Landrails *Rallus philippensis* and Spotted Crakes *Porzana fuminea* were also seen there. In adjacent reedbeds in June and July 1975, I saw a Brown Bittern *Botaurus poiciloptilus*, and several times recently have seen adult and immature Nankeen Night Herons *Nycticorax caledonicus* in nearby trees.

In the Tothill Ranges, N.E. of Marrabel, on November 30, 1974, in tall lush pasture, I am sure that I heard the short then long loud ascending call, which I had heard only a few weeks earlier near Koolunga. It was repeated several times quite close, but no bird could be found.

These records extend the known range of the Brown Quail considerably, as the previous northernmost S.A. records seem to be from the

vicinity of Adelaide. The species has also recently been recorded at Minlaton on lower Yorke Peninsula (Bird Report 1967-68). The nearby Minlaton swamp has a similar type, but larger area, of vegetation than at White Cliff where I have seen the quail.

KING QUAIL *Coturnix chinensis* — One was seen by my mother in about September 1972, 7 km east of Koolunga. On hearing a descending three-note call, she imitated it several times and was answered each time; then a small rich reddish-brown and blue-grey quail flew very close to, and past, her into a nearby crop. I have no doubt that the quail was identified correctly as a male King Quail. Although it is a popular aviary bird, I know of no one in the district at this time who had any of these birds escape.

PAINTED QUAIL *Turnix varia* — These were first seen by me in the Mid-North, 9 km N.W. of Yacka on February 24, 1974, when one was flushed in open eucalypt scrub. At this place the species was seen again several times, with three quail being flushed together on February 22 and March 8, 1975, two on April 12, and four together on May 10. On June 8, 1975, two Painted Quail were seen clearly, furtively running away through the thin dry grass between stones and trees. They appeared basically greyish and heavily marked, with the shoulder area and sides of neck most prominent, being a rich rufous; the back blotched black and brown and marked with pale streaks; the face, throat and chest pale grey, spotted and marked with white; the belly paler; the beak light grey and eyes dark. There were many small bare patches about 10 cm across on the eucalypt leaf litter where the quail had been scratching. Three quail were seen there again on July 23.

At Mundoora Conservation Park on August 4, 1974, two Painted Quail were seen after being heard in mallee scrub. The first as it ran away, and the second, some distance from the first, as it flew from under low bushes. The calls were loud booming notes repeated about eight times in quick succession, with a pause before continuing; the notes being similar to, but huskier than the calls of Bronzewing Pigeons.

At Beetaloo Reservoir, in the southern Flinders Ranges, two large quail were flushed together under big trees on October 8, 1974. They appeared generally greyish-brown and had a prominent rufous area about the shoulders,

with some spots and streaks visible on the birds as they flew away. Similar views were obtained in the other sightings where Painted Quail were seen flying away.

A Painted Quail was seen at Clare on May 20, 1967 by B. Blaycock (Bird Report 1966-67); and I saw one near Auburn in January 1975. The birds have also been seen in the Tothill Ranges in the autumns of 1974 and 1975; a few kilometres south of Marrabel in June 1974, and "more than ten years ago" in the hills near Salters Springs (pers. comm. J. D. Smyth). The species was also sighted near Balaklava in 1974 (pers. comm. N. H. Parish.)

On Eyre Peninsula 25 km N. of Cleve on July 13, 1975, I saw three Painted Quail at close range in mallee scrub as they ran away. This is in the same latitude as the northernmost records indicated by Eckert (1972) i.e. Midgee Rocks and Mt. Wedge.

The range of Painted Quail in S.A. as shown by these records for the Mid-North and by Eckert for Eyre Peninsula, is considerably more than that shown by Condon's *Handlist*; and I would not be surprised if it is found that this species occurs even further north in the Flinders Ranges.

LITTLE QUAIL *Turnix velox* — These birds usually appear in this district in late September, and most leave during January. Moderate numbers are seen most years. In 1974 the species was first seen on September 23 and was soon very common, calling at night and during the day. Several nests with four eggs or recently hatched shells were found in late October, and many broods of up to four fluttering young were seen well into January 1975. The birds were common until the end of January; but my only records after this are two in Mundoora Conservation Park on February 8, one near Koolunga on February 16, and one near Yacka on February 22. Little Quail were present and breeding in similar numbers the previous summer, and again most birds left during January. They were present in crops and pastures, but I found them breeding only in natural tussocky grassland in both seasons. Richard and John Smyth recorded this species in both open and scrubby areas near Salters Springs in each month from October 1974 to February 1975. On October 30 John Smyth and I saw Little Quail in the Tothill Ranges. In the far N.E. of S.A., in mid-October 1974, I recorded one or two Little Quail respectively at: Marree, Mt. Gason Bore, Moomba and 100 km N. of Innamincka.

I have several times seen Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus notatus* and Nankeen Kestrels *Falco cenchroides* carrying what appeared to be adult Little Quail, and have also seen Kestrels unsuccessfully attack this species. These birds may also be able to catch small Stubble Quail, the adults of which I have been fall prey to Whistling Kites *Haliastur sphenurus*, Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax*, Brown Falcons *Falco berigora* and Black Falcons *Falco subniger*, the latter catching quail and numerous other species with spectacular dives and fast chases, usually when the birds are disturbed by fire, mobs of stock, moving vehicles or even other birds of prey. John Smyth reports 18 of these magnificent falcons at Salters Springs last summer over a paddock which had just been burnt. The other species catch the birds on the ground, and Whistling Kites may have been picking up birds injured or killed during

Box 58, Koolunga, S.A. 5464.

mowing. Brown Falcons, although they try, seem to be too slow to catch the quail on the wing.

Red-chested Quail *Turnix pyrrhotorax* and Plain Wanderers *Pedionomus torquatus* have been recorded over a number of years in the Balaklava district. From the apparent frequency of records in this area, it seems that Red-chested Quail may be more common than generally acknowledged. Is it possible that in other areas this species has been overlooked because of similarities with Little Quail? Further details will be published in a paper in preparation.

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