

## REMARKS ON THE STATUS OF THE PAINTED, LITTLE AND RED-CHESTED BUTTON-QUAILS IN THE SOUTH-EAST OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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### INTRODUCTION

Until recently, only two species of button-quails *Turnix* had been reported from the South-East, the Painted *T. varia* and the Little *T. velox*. Below, the local status of these is reviewed, and a third species, the Red-chested *T. pyrrhorothonax* formally reported from the region.

#### *Painted Button-quail*

This species is locally not uncommon in the north-eastern districts of the South-East, where it is apparently resident. It frequents eucalypt woodland such as Brown Stringybark *E. baxteri* and Blue Gum *E. leucoxydon*, usually with an understorey including bracken, *Xanthorrhoea*, *Cassia*, and low myrtaceous species (heath), and occasionally stands of more or less pure

heath, e.g. *Leptospermum juniperinum*. It has been reported from Fairview, Big Heath and Mary Seymour Conservation Parks, from Joanna and the Naracoorte Districts, and from 12-15 km north-east of Penola (Attiwill *in Jenkin et al.* 1964, *in Glover* 1964, *in Reid* 1976, and Attiwill *ms.*, JMB pers. obs., N. C. H. Reid pers. comm.), with breeding recorded from Big Heath CP (Attiwill 1972b), Mary Seymour CP (JMB pers. obs.), near Joanna (A. Ey *in litt.*) and 8 km north of Naracoorte (Attiwill *ms.*).

From further west, there have been no reports since the 1940s. Morgan (1919 and *ms.* notebook in SAM) recorded flushing two pairs near Kingston in October 1918, but gave no details. Ashby (1927) subsequently quoted

Morgan as having seen the species in the Robe district, but this may have been an allusion to the latter's sightings near Kingston, for no such record appears in either Morgan's published accounts or his notebooks (S.A. Parker pers. comm.)<sup>1</sup>. Mr. A. E. Ey, resident of Millicent in the 1930s and 1940s, occasionally flushed individuals from bracken in woodland in the Millicent district during that time, but reports (*in litt.* 3 Feb. 1982) that suitable habitat no longer exists there. Further investigation is required to ascertain whether the species still occurs in the western parts of the South-East; in this respect it is worth noting that it was not once encountered by Mr I. A. May during his ornithological surveys of the area in 1976-81 (May pers. comm.).

#### *Little Button-quail*

.. Previously published records from the South-East are: Bool Lagoon district, '... present, but ... rarely seen' (Hood 1934); Killanoola, three on 6 January and two on 1 March 1973 (Attiwill 1975). From just across the border in western Victoria, the species was reported by Austin (1951) as having nested near Casterton in 1949-50 in light bracken in open country, and observed near Edenhope 'during last two years ... in similar country.' Further, unpublished, records are: Bool Lagoon, breeding in large numbers, spring 1945 (J. B. Hood, *in Attiwill ms.*); Padthaway, Upper South-East, hundreds in *Phalaris* pasture, late 1953 (Attiwill *ms.*).

Over the last fifteen years I have encountered *T. velox* several times in grassy paddocks near the southern end of Bool Lagoon, in the period October-March, and on 4 January 1982 I collected a specimen to substantiate my sightings (SAM B36186, ad.male). Usually the birds were seen singly; in October-December 1974, however, a group of up to six was present, though no evidence of nesting was found in spite of intensive searching. The seasonality of the above occurrences agrees with Eckert's (1972) conclusion that to the southern districts of the State *T. velox* is chiefly a spring-summer visitor.

#### *Red-chested Button-quail*

Although not previously reported in South Australia further south than the Lake Alexandrina-Lake Albert district (Parker pers. comm.), this species was not reported from the South-

East until 1980 (Bourne in Jaensch & Joseph 1980). My first encounter with it in the South-East however, was in February 1975, when I flushed two from a small patch of Star Thistle *Carthamus glaucus* in Section 95, Hundred of Robertson, about 3 km south of Bool Lagoon. Two individuals were seen there on several occasions during the following two to three weeks. Little Button-quails being present in the district at the same time, I was able to notice the differences in the birds, but was unsure of their identity.

In March 1977, I saw several more of these strange button-quail in oat stubble at Stewarts Range, 10 km west of Naracoorte. On 15 February 1978 whilst driving sheep, I flushed a single bird from the roadside 2 km south of Bool Lagoon Game Reserve. On 29 February 1980 I flushed another from wheat stubble and collected it for identification. It proved to be a subadult male *T. pyrrhotorax*, and is now in the SAM (B32862). On the same day in the same paddock, just south of Bool Lagoon, I flushed five other individuals of this species.

Antedating these recent reports is a hitherto unpublished record that I found amongst the notes of my late friend A. R. Attiwill, who wrote that he had identified as this species a single bird shot at Joanna by a Mr J. E. Smith on 22 March 1942.

*T. pyrrhotorax* may well be a regular visitor to the Bool Lagoon district. If until now it has passed largely unnoticed there, the reasons may be that it prefers fairly dense cover such as Star Thistles, from which it is difficult to flush, and also that this type of country, stubble and overgrown fallow, is not much frequented by experienced observers.

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<sup>1</sup>Before encountering *T. varia* in the South-East, Morgan had already had at least some acquaintance with the species elsewhere, having collected a set of eggs at Blackwood in the Adelaide district on 17 October 1908 (B16576).