

NOTES ON THE LITTLE QUAIL

by D. N. KRAEHENBUEHL

The extraordinary movement south of the Crimson Chat in the spring and early summer of 1968, excited the interest of many bird observers in South Australia. As much attention was focused on this species, the passage of other interior birds to the southern settled districts has possibly been partly overlooked, so I have taken the opportunity to record some notes on the Little Quail (*Turnix velox*).

The last time I can recall the Little Quail in large numbers was in 1955—a very wet year in the more arid northern regions of South Australia. In the Umbrella Myall (*Acacia sowdenii*) woodland between Wirraminna and Kingoonya, the birds were nesting in great number.

In September, 1968, Little Quail were nesting on the plains in the Everard Ranges, where seasonal conditions, said to be one of the very best in living memory, had encouraged a dense and lush growth of herbs, grasses and annuals.

North of Kingoonya in Mulga (*Acacia aneura*) scrub, I saw many of these quail which usually sought refuge in tall clumps of Spear Grass (*Stipa spp.*), and it was seldom difficult to flush birds from nests or hiding squats. In the Gawler Ranges north-west of Port Augusta, where again the country was in excellent heart, Little Quail were numerous, particularly in rock gibber areas near Lake Everard where two nests were found which had been placed under bushes of *Ptilotus obovatus*.

Mr. Gordon Ragless made several trips to the north of the State in 1968, and he has kindly furnished me with the following details of the wide occurrence and movements of the Little Quail in the interior.

March 26. At Wooltana Station on the eastern side of the Flinders Range, a few birds on the plains among good grass following heavy January-February rains.

May 17-20. No birds seen between Hawker and Marree and adjacent country. Country showing much improvement due to good early rains.

July 26-29. A few birds seen north of Copley to Clayton Creek. More numerous around Farina.

August 11. First nesting noted. Almost fresh eggs noted near Clayton Creek.

September-October. Many birds north of Hawker to Marree and general nesting noted.'

The increased acreage of land sown to cereal crops in South Australia during 1968 provided further suitable habitat for nesting quail, and Mr. Bruce Copley of Bute has sent me this intriguing but tragic note.

'This year we have had a great number of Stubble and Little Quail in the paddocks. From my seat ten feet up on the header platform I've seen the quail population in full view as they scurried down the rows as the headers bore down on them. Hundreds must have died under the wheels or in the machinery as they left their flight too late and couldn't clear the heads, and so got sucked in through the comb. It was quite a sight watching the little youngsters, mostly balls of fluff following the parent birds down the furrows.' In a later communication (May 1969), Mr. Copley informed me that hardly any quail were left in the Bute district and that these were mainly the Stubble species.

On February 2, 1969, I flushed two Little Quail from high grass in Peppermint Gum (*Eucalyptus odorata*) woodland at Tarnma in the Tothill Ranges, 70 miles north of Adelaide, but this is the only record I have from the Mid North of the State. However my most curious observation was made on December 7, 1968, when I was umpiring a tennis match in the South Parklands opposite the Pulteney Grammar School. To my amazement a Little Quail suddenly alighted on the edge of the court and casually wended its way into the surrounding parklands!

Other odd stragglers which have been reported from southern districts are viz; November 6, 1968, G. Ragless. Single bird at Ashbourne in cleared land with various improved pasture plants.

November 20, 1968, T. Smith. Single bird in clump of sedges (*Scirpus nodosus*) at Seaton Golf Links.

December 4, 1968, T. Smith. Two birds flushed at the Amphitheatre, Halletts Cove.
December 20, 1968, G. Ragless. Single bird

at Blackwood, in field containing many Stubble Quail.

January 26, 1969, M. Bonnin. Three birds at Bosun's Point, near Robe.

See *S.A.O.A. Newsletter*, March, 1969.

The migration of the Little Quail to the settled districts has no doubt coincided with the exceptional seasonal conditions experienced throughout the State in 1968, and we must reflect why this phenomenon occurred?

Are these massed breeding cycles one of nature's means of ensuring a buildup of population after a number of continuous

bad droughts, and do the successive hatching of birds force earlier broods to migrate south in search of food?

Another question which remains unanswered, is what happens to the stragglers? Do they remain in the southern areas or do some of these return to the interior districts? Probably only a concerted effort by bird banders in another season similar to that which occurred in 1968-69, will help to solve some of these questions.

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