

## NORTHERN RECORDS OF THE PAINTED BUTTON-QUAIL IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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### INTRODUCTION

Records of the Painted Button-quail *Turnix varia* detailed here are in addition to those in Pedler (1975) and include further northern extensions of range. These records give a better indication of the bird's status north of the range given in Condon (1969) but further work is needed to determine distribution, status, and possible movements in the Flinders Ranges, northern Eyre Peninsula, and the northern Murray Mallee.

Most of these sightings are of birds flying after being flushed, and identification is based on the large size and general grey-brown colour of these quail in flight, distinct from the colour of other quail found in South Australia. Finer details of plumage were often seen, usually when birds were flushed more than once or seen running.

The noisy, 'flappy' flight of this species as it rises and flies away is distinctive and useful to those familiar with it as an aid to identification. The sound is more like that made by Bronzewings, *Phaps*, as they flush than that of other quails in southern Australia.

It is well known that Painted Button-quail scratch away patches of plant litter with their feet while feeding (e.g., Whinray 1978, Hindwood 1966). These feeding scrapes are shallow round areas about 10-15 cm across where plant litter has been scraped aside, usually exposing soil. Such scrapes are distinct from dust baths which are deeper, rounded hollows, usually made in bare soil. The number and density of scrapes varies greatly. For example, in some areas only a few scrapes are found scattered in the litter under several shrubs. However, in other places, many hundreds of scrapes are present, either scattered over a wide area, or so closely spaced that almost all the litter in an area has been worked over by the birds.

While the presence of scrapes alone may not be enough to conclude that this species is present in areas where it has not previously been recorded, it should at least encourage thorough searching to find whether Painted Button-quail are present or whether something else is making similar scrapes. The following records show that when scrapes are found, a search will, at least occasionally, be successful in flushing quail. It seems that *Turnix varia* often avoids being seen by running furtively away from a single observer or a slow moving group. However several beat-

ers moving quickly through such an area are more likely to flush the birds.

The records below are divided into four regions and notes are given on habitat.

### LOWER NORTH RECORDS

#### 9 km north-west of Yacka

I have not been able to find the birds here since July 1975 (see Pedler 1975) although I flushed one out while driving sheep through similar habitat a few kilometres to the south on 4 November 1975. This bird must have been present for some time as there were numerous scrapes under several trees nearby. Many searches of the latter area before and after this sighting found no trace of the species except for a single bird flushed in June 1981.

#### 7 km east of Koolunga

In May 1980, a specimen (S.A. Museum Reg. No. B33134) was found dead under a fence adjacent to farm buildings and a small area of *Eucalyptus porosa* woodland.

#### 5 km east of Yacka

I flushed one Painted Button-quail from *Lepidosperma* (Iron grass) and *Bursaria spinosa* under large *Eucalyptus leucoxylon* on 13 August 1977.

#### Mundoora Conservation Park

In addition to the sighting in Pedler (1975) I flushed one bird from below shrubs in mallee on 6 September 1975.

#### Port Davis

On 11 July 1982 I flushed a *T. varia* in dense low shrubland less than 1.5 m in height and consisting of *Alyxia buxifolia*, *Geijera* sp., *Myoporum insulare*, *Scaevola spinescens*, *Pittosporum* sp. and *Cassinia* sp. on the low coastal dune which is surrounded by mudflats and extensive samphire areas. A number of birds must have been present as there were hundreds of fresh and old scrapes spread along more than one kilometre of the dune.

#### Tothill Ranges

I flushed four birds together in short tussock grass and small shrubs under large *Eucalyptus leucoxylon* on 4 August 1975. These birds flew directly from an area of many feeding scrapes. In June and August 1976 I found areas of fresh scrapes in litter on the ridge of the range and could find no birds. But, on 29 May 1977, after finding a few scrapes in an area of dense shrubs, I started to search with several companions, one of whom flushed two quail giving

us a good view. Also, on 1 November 1981 after finding scrapes and searching, I flushed a Painted Button-quail from dense undergrowth below *Eucalyptus* on the ridge of the range.

#### 10 km north of Robertstown

Dr R. Schodde (*in litt.* July 1979) collected one of a pair of Painted Button-quail in open mallee on 13 May 1976. The specimen, a male, is in the Australian National Wildlife Collection Reg. No. 18698.

#### 2 km east of Marrabel

After finding fresh scrapes on 10 August 1975, I searched the area again on 13 September, and flushed a Painted Button-quail from short grass and litter under *Acacia paradoxa* and large *Eucalypts*.

#### Spring Gully Conservation Park

I flushed one quail under Red Stringybarks *Eucalyptus macrorhyncha* on 13 September 1975 at Skillogalee, just east of the Park. Richard Smyth (*pers. comm.*) saw three birds in Stringybark and *E. leucoxyton* in this area and found scrapes in the Park on 4 June 1977. He also saw one in the Park in scattered *E. macrorhyncha* and *E. leucoxyton* on 4 November 1979, and I flushed one from long grass and small shrubs under Red Stringybark in the Park on 21 September 1980.

#### Salter's Springs

In an area of ungrazed scrub on the Smyth property, Richard Smyth and I flushed two or three Painted Button-quail several times on 27 September 1975. Richard has also seen the quail in this area on a number of other occasions.

#### 5 km north-west of Saddleworth

Many scrapes were found in litter under *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia pycnantha* in April 1981. Several feathers found with the scrapes were identified as belonging to *T. varia* when compared with material in the S.A. Museum.

#### Lorne (18 km SSE of Port Wakefield)

N. H. Parish and I saw a Painted Button-quail running away through sparse chenopod understorey in a small patch of mallee only about 100 m from the beach on 25 October 1975.

### FLINDERS RANGES RECORDS

#### Beetaloo Reservoir

In October 1975 I flushed two quail within a few metres of where I saw them a year previously. There were many scrapes under nearby Dog Wattle *Acacia watsiana*. In June 1980, Ken Grossman (*pers. comm.*) saw a Painted Button-quail running away in dense mallee and Dog Wattle on his property just east of the above area.

#### Nelshaby

One bird was flushed by J. Pedler and I in a steep gully at the base of the range in October 1979. The habitat included mixed undershrubs of *Cassinia* and *Olearia* below *Eucalyptus odorata*.

#### Mt Remarkable National Park

On 3 April 1977, I found many feeding scrapes near Alligator Gorge. Some of these were very fresh and several showed three-toed footprints, characteristic of *Turnix*. There was a dense cover of low shrubs and herbs under Range Box *Eucalyptus microcarpa*. On 16 April 1978 J. B. Paton (*pers. comm.*) and other observers saw a quail, which they identified as *T. varia*, in *Eucalypt* and *Acacia pycnantha* woodland at the foot of Mt. Remarkable.

On 3 October 1979, Bishop S. B. Rosea flushed a quail from a nest containing four eggs, part of the way up Mt Remarkable under *Eucalyptus cladocalyx*, *E. leucoxyton* and *E. camaldulensis*. His description of the nest and eggs (*pers. comm.*) fits that of *T. varia*.

#### Devil's Peak

I found many fresh scrapes in litter under whipstick mallee with little undergrowth in April 1978 but saw no birds despite a search. However, on 12 August 1978, after finding many scrapes in the same area, one Painted Button-quail was seen running away and then flushed.

#### Dutchman's Stern

While we were camped at the base of this range near Quorn on 12 and 13 October 1980, R. Jaensch, A. Lees and A. McIntyre each flushed one or two Painted Button-quail in separate areas. Habitats included *Eucalyptus cladocalyx* with *Xanthorrhoea* and shrub understorey, and mallee with *Cassinia* and *Olearia*.

#### 16 km east of Holowilena Station

While climbing a steep sided, rocky valley on 17 July 1976 with K. Grossman and M. Catford, we flushed a Painted Button-quail. I flushed it again higher up the slope, obtaining a good view. The habitat was scattered mallee with a variety of large shrubs including several species of *Acacia* and also *Triodia irritans* growing among the boulders.

#### 5 km north of Oodlawirra

On 29 September 1976, I flushed a Painted Button-quail twice in mallee regrowth adjacent to a large area of mallee. I obtained an excellent view of the bird, which had made many feeding scrapes among leaves and twigs at the base of several clumps of mallee. I found similar scrapes there in February and June 1977 without finding birds; however on 17 July 1977

I again found scrapes and flushed a Painted Button-quail.

At the following five localities I have found feeding scrapes but have not seen *T. varia*.

*8 km east of Blinman*

In April 1977 I found a number of scrapes, some fresh, in litter under *Eremophila freelingi* and *Dodonaea* and scattered Eucalypts on a steep hillside.

*Mt Serle.*

In August 1977 I found scrapes under an area of low *Acacia* on the southern slope of Mount Serle.

*Moockra Tower*

I found a few scrapes in thin eucalypt litter in July 1976.

*15 km south of Jamestown*

In April and August 1978 I found scrapes in leaf litter under large *Eucalyptus leucoxylon* and *Acacia pycnantha*.

*25 km east of Orroroo*

In May 1980 I found many scrapes over a wide area in dry grass and under *Cassia* in mallee scrub adjacent to Black Rock Conservation Park.

## NORTHERN EYRE PENINSULA RECORDS

*Corrobinnie Rocks*

In October 1981 J. Thompson and S. Austin found the remains of a nest, possibly that of a *Malurus* sp., which had been lined mainly with feathers of *T. varia*. These are now in the S.A. Museum, Reg. No. B33459.

*Sinclair Gap*

G. Ragless, R. Schodde, J. Pedler and I flushed two Painted Button-quail in mallee scrub with a shrub understorey which included *Eremophila scoparia* and *Olearia* on 18 October 1981. C. Garrett (pers. comm.) picked up a road-killed *T. varia* on 28 March 1982 and said that there have also been occasional sightings in the area. The specimen is now in spirit in the S.A. Museum, Reg. No. B36358.

*5 km east of Scrubby Peak H.S.*

J. Reid and L. Edington saw three *T. varia* at close range in long grass near the base of a tree in open mallee. The three birds, one larger and more brightly coloured than the others, were observed dust bathing (Reid, pers. comm.)

## NORTHERN MURRAY MALLEE RECORDS

*Chowilla Station*

On 19 and 20 August 1977, F. Sheldon and I flushed one bird a number of times from the same spot in long dry grass under River Box

*Eucalyptus largiflorens*, on the River Murray flood-plain near Coombool Swamp. On one occasion the bird flew a short distance and ran in a large circle across an open area, returning to the original spot. We could not find a nest. Possibly the bird was a female as it was large and richly coloured. There were a great many scrapes among areas of tall, dry, grass tussocks under the trees.

*7 km south of Barmera*

In early 1975 when Stubble Quail *Coturnix pectoralis*, and Little Button-quail *T. velox*, were present in large numbers, quail shooters took a number of *T. varia* in mallee and spear-grass on a sand ridge near Spectacle Lakes (P. Schramm pers. comm.). One of these, a female taken in May 1975 by Schramm, is in the possession of J. B. Paton and others have been preserved as mounted specimens. Schramm claimed to have seen up to 30 *T. varia* in this area on occasions and also stated that with practice it was not hard to distinguish *T. varia* from other species in flight.

*4 km south-west of Canopus H.S.*

On 25 March 1978 I flushed two Painted Button-quail a few metres apart in mallee scrub with *Triodia* and undershrubs of *Beyeria leschenaultii* and *Acacia ligulata*. One was about Stubble Quail size, and the other was slightly smaller. Both were pale and unmarked below, and grey-brown inconspicuously marked above.

## DISCUSSION

*Habitat*

While the above notes on habitat are brief they show that a considerable range of woodland habitats is used by this species. In nearly all areas however there are the following features: areas of plant litter below trees or shrubs, and at least enough low cover into which the birds may retreat when disturbed.

*Distribution*

These records demonstrate that Painted Button-quail occur throughout the lower north and southern Flinders Ranges and northwards at least as far as Hawker (see map). If records of 'scrapes only' are accepted then the bird's distribution would include the North Flinders Ranges.

Hobbs (1961), referring to south western New South Wales, recorded Painted Button-quail in red gum timber along the River Murray and said, "there is a quail which occurs with some regularity in the mallee, and the habitat would suggest Painted Quail (sic), but I never succeeded in confirming the iden-



tity." Thus the River Murray records and nearby mallee record from Canopus are not entirely unexpected. However I know of no other records from this area.

Records in the lower north-east mallee areas (*i.e.* Oodlawirra, Robertstown, Canopus), suggest that the species may be present through much of this low rainfall region, although possibly in small numbers.

Similarly on northern Eyre Peninsula, although the species is now known to occur as far north as Scrubby Peak in the southern Gawler Ranges, it possibly also occurs throughout the mallee areas of Eyre Peninsula, the Gawler Ranges and in the extensive tracts of mallee to the west and north-west thereof.

Both the above regions have received little attention from ornithologists and a secretive species such as *T. varia* could easily have been overlooked.

Box 58, Koolunga, S.A. 5464.

#### *Seasonal Movements?*

There seems to be little evidence of seasonal variation in the numbers of occurrences of this species. The paucity of records during summer months may be an artefact of less time spent in the field by observers during this period.

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