

Bird Notes

Observations of Brown Quail on Point Sturt Peninsula, Lake Alexandrina

NATHANIEL DOECKE

The Brown Quail, *Coturnix ypsilophora* is considered rare throughout South Australia (Condon 1968, SAOA 1985, 2008, Marchant and Higgins 1993) including the Strathalbyn and Goolwa districts (Eckert 2000). This report covers observations of the species made from a single locality throughout the last decade.

I first recorded Brown Quail on Point Sturt Peninsula on 23 October 2000 and have observed them on many occasions since November 2001. They have been recorded calling during 44 of the succeeding 92 months to June 2009, and again from October 2010 to the present (June 2012), often from a wetland on the northern edge of the peninsula (35° 29' 30" S, 138° 59' 30" E). The quail are usually first detected by their calls, or flushed from areas of dense grassland. Sightings are usually brief but I have had a number of excellent sightings of the quail feeding on Veldt Grass, *Erharta calycina* seeds. They have been recorded calling in all months but with a noticeable increase from August-November. As my family and I live on a nearby property, observation opportunity has been fairly constant over the reporting period, as someone who recognises their call is almost always present.

The wetland area that is a favoured habitat for the birds consists of several deep channels

fed by Lake Alexandrina. Water levels in the wetland are usually highest in winter-early spring, gradually drying out over the summer. The vegetation in this area consists of dense un-grazed Wheat Grass, *Elymus scaber*, Kikuyu *Pennisetum clandestinum*, plantings of Swamp Paperbark, *Melaleuca halimifolium*, thickets of Lignum, *Muehlenbeckia florulenta*, reeds, *Phragmites australis* and Club-rushes, *Ficinia* sp. In wetter periods and when the grasses are seeding in spring, the Brown Quail will also disperse into the surrounding paddocks to the south of Point Sturt Road. These paddocks are dominated by Perennial Veldt Grass, *Erharta calycina*, scattered with <12 year old revegetation plantings of chiefly native shrubs and trees. Brown Quail are also occasionally recorded at other times of the year in these surrounding areas and they sometimes use irrigated gardens, most notably during the summer of 2011-2012. In the last few years, there has been a shift in habitat usage by the quail. They are now recorded more frequently in the revegetation and dense grassland areas away from the lake, often around *Acacia dodonaeifolia* and *Acacia paradoxa* shrubs. This is likely due to the maturing of the revegetation, so that it now provides the dense habitat favoured by these quail.

Stubble Quail, *Coturnix pectoralis* are also recorded frequently, occasionally in mixed coveys with the Brown Quail, but they generally prefer the drier, more open grassland. They are distinguished by their smaller build and lighter brown colouration with white streaks and their rapid three-note 'pip-pi-wheat' calls, compared to the Brown's two-note rising 'pip- peeeep' calls. Little and Painted Button Quail have also been recorded in the area. The former was recorded once in 2000 and the latter was recorded in a small covey during early 2012.

Pre-2010 observations away from the lakeside wetlands

Most of the sightings made outside the wetland before 2010 were of one or two birds. Distances referred to are from the wetland area.

- May 2004 - a covey of eight - ten was present along Point Sturt Road;
- 17 Oct 2004 - two birds flushed from *Acacia paradoxa* near road verge 350 m E;
- 10 June 2007 - two were flushed from under *Acacia dodonaeifolia* 450 m SE;
- Sep/Oct 2007 - two were seen feeding on Veldt grass seeds and observed from close range 500 m E;
- 11 November 2008 - one bird was seen crossing Point Sturt Road, then hiding in roadside vegetation;
- January 2009 - a single bird observed near a gate onto Point Sturt Road;
- 28 May 2009 - a sighting of one bird (and probably others) 400 m SE - heard in this area till 5 June.



Brown Quail
Simeon Doecke

As a result of the Murray-Darling basin drought from 2006 onwards, Lake Alexandrina began slowly drying and by February 2010 the water level was over 300 metres from the wetland. When the Lake began to recede in the spring of 2006 observations of Brown Quail became much less frequent, and between November 2009 and October 2010 there were no observations. It seems the birds may have left the area over this eleven-month period (possibly for the nearby Goolwa Barrage region as observations there increased at that time). Certainly, if they were present, they were not calling. From mid-March 2010, however, the lake level had begun to rise due to the increased rainfall and flooding in the catchment, and Brown Quail were recorded again on 22 October 2010. From October 2010 to the present (June 2012), they have again become resident, heard or seen regularly. During 2011 they were present in higher numbers, in line with the irruption that occurred throughout much of the state at that time.

Historical information on the species' status in South Australia

There were only three records of Brown Quail in annual Bird Reports from 1964-1974 (Black 1975) two in the 1977-1981 Bird Report (Bransbury 1984) and seven in the 1982-1999 Bird Report

(Carpenter *et al* 2004). Reported observations have increased more recently with a total of 31 in Bird Reports between 2001 and 2005, 13 from the South East and 13 from Adelaide Plains/Mount Lofty Ranges (Rogers 2003-2008b), but this is likely to reflect improved observer confidence as much as an increase in prevalence.

Marchant and Higgins (1993) regarded the species as resident in the wetter parts of its range but an intermittent visitor to semi-arid and arid regions. Condon (1968) referred to only two breeding records, at Magill in 1872 and Encounter Bay in 1929. The former but not the latter is supported by two egg clutches in the South Australian Museum (SAMA B29702 and B29703). A single egg collected at Nalpa, on the northern shores of Lake Alexandrina by G. Bonnin sometime before 1978 and originally thought to be that of Stubble Quail (SAMA B31950) is the only other museum evidence of Brown Quail breeding in the State (A Black, pers. comm). Pedler (1986) observed Brown Quail breeding in sedges adjoining the Broughton River near Koolunga (Mid North) but did not consider it to be resident there. Jack Bourne (pers. comm.) has recorded Brown Quail in the South East (Bool Lagoon area) in every month during some years, but has failed to do so for periods of over twelve months at other times. Eckert (2000) reported records in the region surrounding Lake Alexandrina from the Bremer and Finniss Rivers "every few years" and considered the species to be "possibly resident" with "local breeding likely

but unconfirmed". Since 2007, there have been frequent observations from Hindmarsh Island and Sir Richard Peninsula, about 10 km south-west of this location (Cutten 2008, Syson 2008, pers. obs.)

Our observations show that a resident population exists on Point Sturt Peninsula on the southern shore of Lake Alexandrina.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to Andrew Black for information on the species status in South Australia.

REFERENCES

- Black, A. B. 1975. Record of the Brown Quail at Willunga. *South Australian Ornithologist* 27: 22.
- Bransbury, J. 1984. Bird Report, 1977-1981. *South Australian Ornithologist* 29: 121-168.
- Carpenter, G., Black, A. Harper, D. and Horton, P. Bird Report 1982-1999. *South Australian Ornithologist* 24: 93-151.
- Condon, H. T. 1968. *A handlist of the birds of South Australia*. Second Edition. SAOA, Adelaide.
- Cutten, D. 2008. *South Australian Ornithological Association Newsletter* 207: 14
- Eckert, H. J. 2000. Birds. In *Natural History of Strathalbyn and Goolwa Districts*. Strathalbyn Naturalists Club. Douglas Press, Woodville North, S.A.
- Marchant, S. and Higgins, P. J. (eds.) 1993. *Handbook of Australian, Antarctic and New Zealand Birds. Volume 2, Raptors to lapwings*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Pedler, L. P. 1986. Brown Quail breeding in Mid-Northern South Australia. *South Australian Ornithologist* 30: 24-25.
- Rogers, C. 2003. Bird Report 2001. *South Australian Ornithologist* 34: 57-79.
- Rogers, C. 2004. Bird Report 2002. *South Australian Ornithologist* 34: 211-221.
- Rogers, C. 2006. Bird Report 2003. *South Australian Ornithologist* 35: 15-26.
- Rogers, C. 2008a. Bird Report 2004. *South Australian Ornithologist* 35: 86-95.
- Rogers, C. 2008b. Bird Report 2005. *South Australian Ornithologist* 35: 132-143.
- SAOA. 1985. *A Field List of the Birds of South Australia*. 3rd Edition. South Australian Ornithological Association, Adelaide.
- SAOA. 2008. *A Field List of the Birds of South Australia*. 4th Edition. South Australian Ornithological Association, Adelaide.
- Syson, W. 2008. *South Australian Ornithological Association Newsletter* 207: 14.

Nathaniel P. Doecke
PO Box 168
Milang, South Australia 5256