

Red-backed Button-quail

FAMILY: *Phasianidae*

GENUS: *Turnix*

SPECIES: *maculosa*

OTHER NAMES: Red-backed Quail, Black-backed Quail.

Description:

The Red-backed Button-quail is the smallest and most cryptic of the Australian button-quail. Usually encountered in small parties of around 5 birds, this bird lives in pockets of damp or rank grassland or herbfields. Red-backed Button-quail may be either sedentary or nomadic, depending on the availability of suitable habitat. Some habitats form and disappear with the onset and retreat of wet periods. Hence in the Top End where rank grasslands tend not to persist but occur seasonally, the Red-backed Button-quail tends to be nomadic, whereas in the south of its distribution it is more sedentary as its habitat there tends to be permanent.

Unlike most other birds, in the case of button-quail, the female of this species is the largest and most colourful. She has a dusky grey crown and back with paired dark stripes separated with a white line. Each feather is marked with black and edged in a cream-buff. The breast, face and throat are a rusty brown, with a duller brown extending to the side of the neck and flanks. The belly is white and the bill and feet yellow.

Males resemble females but have more defined black markings and edging to each feather, the face is buff, he lacks the rusty-brown colouration of the female and has a grey-black bill. In addition to this, he is also comparatively smaller than the female.

Immatures resemble males but are generally paler in overall colouration. Downy young are dusky on the back with creamy stripes running centrally and laterally along the body.

Length: Male 120-130mm; Female 130-140mm

Subspecies:

None.

Status:

In the wild: uncommon to moderately abundant

In aviculture: uncommon

Threats:

Threatening processes include the clearing of habitat for pasture and cropping. Its terrestrial habits also predicate it to being vulnerable to predation by introduced predators such as cats and foxes.

Distribution:

Coastal northern Australia. Occasionally found as far south as the south coast of NSW and central Victoria.

Also occurs from Philippines to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.

Habitat:

Damp rank grassland and dense herbfields.

Diet:

Greens (herbage) seeds of grasses and insects.

Breeding:

Occurs mainly from October to July and co-incides with peak insect abundance. The nest is a shallow scrape under a grass tussock or similar shelter and is lined with fine grass.

Surrounding grass stems are usually bent in such a way as to form a roof or canopy with an entrance to the nest to one side.

Sex roles are reversed in this species, and hence the male constructs the nest incubates the eggs and rears the young, whilst the female booms in courtship and defends the breeding territory.

In captivity Red-backed Button-quail will readily nest on the ground. As is the case for other quail, thick shrubbery or (preferably) tussock grasses will help to provide the shelter and security they require.

Sexual Maturity:

Has been reported to be attained in as little as four months.

Courtship Display:

Is performed by the female and simply consists of booming by the female within the nesting territory.

Clutch:

4 to 5 dull white sometimes finely speckled eggs (17x22mm). Incubation period: 14 days.

The young leave the nest almost immediately after hatching. At around 2 weeks, the young are able to fly and usually begin to leave the breeding area at this time.

Mutations and Hybrids:

None.