

**Buff-breasted Button-quail *Turnix olivei*
between Mareeba and Mt. Malloy, Queensland.**

Site: About 1.5 km N of Carr Creek on the Mareeba / Mt. Malloy Road is an old road-metal storage pad with sealed surface measuring about 80m x 25m lying just behind road-side vegetation and trees on the E side. There is an entrance from the road at both ends of this area, the southerly one providing the better access. This species has been seen on both sides of the road at this spot by Lloyd Nielsen and Andy Anderson in savannah woodland where the grass is sparser. The east side of the road is unfenced publicly owned land regarded as the better habitat as the grass is sparser and shorter, much bare ground between the tufts. The west side, beyond the wide road reserve, is fenced private land owned by a Mr Quaid. The manager may not be sympathetic to trespassers especially biologists and environmentalists. Here the grass tufts are larger and denser.

Habitat: The ground here is plain and flat, composed of a buff coloured soil which dusts into a very fine powder. Apart from the grass there is little or no other ground cover. The grass grows in well spaced tufts with seed-heads 300 to 500mm high. It was not stony, there was little or no leaf debris and there were no sign of platelets.

The Observations:

1. On 2 April 1995 at 07:00 Lloyd Nielsen heard a booming call from the west side and on following it up, flushed a female Buff-breasted Button-quail. His identification was based on considerable experience of the species, its plain brown unpatterned general colour with darker primaries and its large size.
2. On 4 April, at 06.50, I heard booming emitting from a source under or close to the fence less than .10m distant in a shrubby area on the west side. A second sequence of booms was not immediately forthcoming so after a minute or two I walked near to the sounds origin but didn't flush the bird. I enlisted the aid of my wife Tricia and searched the area for a total of three hours on both sides of the road without seeing any Button-quail. Distant booming was heard at about 07.20 from 100m further south.
3. On 5 April, immediately on my arrival, loud booming was heard from just inside the fence on the west side at a point immediately opposite the northern entry to the storage pad. This was followed by a second longer burst from about 10m further north. A third fainter burst of booming emanated perhaps 50m further to the north-west. I walked briskly towards the source flushing a female Buff-breasted Button Quail from about 5m ahead of me from fairly bare ground, at a point closer than I had expected. Perhaps the bird was facing away from me on this occasion. In flight it rose to a height of about 1.5m doing a half circle around me, returning to the direction from which I approached.

4. On 5 April, I joined Glen Homes at the site at 06.30 in an attempt to tape the bird's call, replay the call as a lure and photograph the bird. No calls were heard until about 07.40 when distant booming emanated from some 150m south of the previous encounters. We followed the bird around and it was still calling when I departed 08.50. In the meantime the bird, apparently just one individual, moved north and east, out on to the road reserve and across to the eastern side before moving south. It must have walked at least 300m including across the highway.

The Call; At close range the boom was a slurred disyllabic note 'uh-hum' which at a distance sounded like a single note. There was a slight accent at the start of the second syllable. This note was repeated regularly at about one second intervals for between 5 and 16 times. The pitch was constant, in the lower base range, quite musical, and could be imitated by a man with a deep voice. To imitate the call, I inhale for the first syllable and exhale for the second and this may be how the bird utters the sound thus allowing it to emit long sequences.

The call of the painted Button-quail is at a similar pitch but is a single note and perhaps rather less musical. The bird did not appear to respond when a tape of Painted Button-quail was played. Glen Holmes recorded distant Buff-breasted calls but may have got closer after my departure.

The Sighting: The bird was seen at close range in flight and without optical aids. It was about the size of a Brown Quail, plain buffy-brown with darker remiges. It did not appear entirely uniform, there being some slightly darker areas on the back. Whether these were morphological features or artefact created by shadow from perhaps raised scapulars I couldn't tell.

Identification: The Button-quail call emanating from a plain coloured, Brown Quail sized bird distinguishes Buff-breasted Button-quail from others in the genus.

Mike Carter
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