

BARC Submission. Buff-breasted Button-quail *Turnix olivei* between Mareeba and Mt Malloy, late January 1995. Submitted by Danny Rogers, 8 June 2020.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

In the early 1990s I worked on the “Plumages and related matters” sections for the Button-quail accounts in HANZAB. This involved examination of all skins I could get hold of at the Museum of Victoria, including loans from other Australian museums. A highlight of that period was being able to examine four of the only six skins in existence of Buff-breasted Button-quail, and to read the diaries of McLennan, who had collected the birds near Coen as part of a long field campaign to find their nests. The specimens were (and are) striking, and made me aware of how distinctive and poorly known this species is. I was fired up by Button-quails at the time, and often watched the Painted Button-quails that happened to be within walking distance of my home in St Andrews.

At about the same time reports emerged of Lloyd Nielsen getting onto Buff-breasted Button-quails in the north of the Atherton Tablelands, and I did something I hardly ever do: an interstate twitch. David Andrew, Tom Smith, and Jon Starks came too, and we had 3-4 days mostly spent walking through dry woodlands in search of Buff-BBQ in the northern Atherton Tablelands, at sites recommended by Lloyd Nielsen. By the end of the trip I’d seen I was confident I’d seen Buff-breasted BQ at two sites, and suspected I’d seen one at a third. I took copious field notes which formed the basis of an identification article I wrote in *Wingspan* later that year; a copy of the article is attached to this submission.

Patrick Webster, a PhD Candidate at UQ, is now trying hard to rediscover Buff-breasted Button-quail and needs to review past records. I am therefore making a submission here, but I have a problem: my field notes were all lost in the Black Saturday bushfires. This submission therefore comprises my *Wingspan* ID article, and additional explanatory notes from memory. It was 25 years ago and I’ve now forgotten a fair bit of detail. I’ve therefore restricted this submission to the Buff-breasted Quail that I saw best and remember most clearly, seen on the last full birding day of the trip.

LOCATION

Between Mt Malloy and Mareeba, about 300 m east of the highway, on the opposite side of the road to Lake Gregory. I roughly estimate the location (through Google Earth) at 16° 49.3S, 145° 22.27E. It was no more than a few hundred metres from the site where Mike Carter reported a Buff-breasted Quail in BARC Submission 1094, and it’s possible that our sightings involved the same bird. The habitat was as described in that submission: savannah woodland with reddish buff earth, little or no leaf litter, and little ground cover apart from sparse tufts or tussocks of grass, knee height or so. The area was mainly flat, but the sighting was of a bird flushed from the slopes of a low ridge.

DATE

Late January 1995. I don’t have a more precise record of the date, but given that it was on the second last day of a trip based around an Australia Day weekend (the 26th Jan fell on a Thursday in 1995) it was likely some time between the 28th and 31st Jan.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF SIGHTING

Our party that day included Lloyd Nielsen and Keith and Lindsay Fisher in addition to the four Victorians. After some fairly random birding at the site initially, we'd started to walk in a line abreast, each observer about 10 m from the next, to increase our chances of flushing quail. We'd been birding for most of the morning and had flushed several Painted Button-quail, getting views of them both in flight and on the ground. We'd then moved further from the lake, as it was felt that the more sparsely vegetated areas to the east looked like more promising habitat for Buff-breasted.

Only a few tens of metres from the nearest Painted Button-quails, but on a low slope with less grass cover and more bare ground, someone in our party flushed a Button-quail that several of us saw in flight at longish range and considered promising because of its plain sandy rump. We reorganised our line and tried to relocate it, walking up the slope of a low ridge. Despite scanning the ground carefully, we did not see the bird on the ground before it flushed from between me and Lloyd Nielsen; it was less than 5 metres from me when it took off (attracting our attention with whirring wing-beats), and I had good looks at it with the naked eye. It flew fairly straight on take-off but then gradually hooked left and was flying almost at right angles to me when it slowed down and apparently landed perhaps 70-80 m away. In the latter half of its flight I managed to get (Zeiss Dyalte 10x40) binoculars onto it, and while I managed to keep it in view, my binoculars were only sharply focussed on it very briefly before it landed. We were unable to relocate the bird. I completed writing my notes on the bird on the same day.

DESCRIPTION

Took off steeply with loud whirring wing-beats, rising near-vertically to about 1m height and levelling off to a flight altitude of less than 3 m, remaining below the canopy of the woodland. When flight had levelled off it became easier to discern wing-pattern as the wing-beats and flight slowed down a bit as it gained distance on us; at least once it glided briefly when changing directions. Descent was gradual but it was obscured by vegetation when it actually landed.

The immediate impression on take-off was of a very large button-quail with very plain, light sandy rufous rump, uppertail and lower back. It was much larger than Little Button-Quail. Although no objective measure of size was possible, I had seen Painted Button-quails a few minutes previously (and also flushed and watched Painteds and Little in Victoria in the week before and week after the Qld trip). I am confident the bird was at least as large as the largest Painted Button-quails I've ever seen – if anything it looked even bigger, perhaps an optical illusion caused by the paleness of the rump. From the size of the bird I presume it was a female.

The rump (and upper back and uppertail coverts) were plain light sandy rufous, and I didn't notice any darker markings. My Wingspan article notes that Buff-breasted has a more stubby rear-end than Painted Button-quail, with the rear-end of Painted looking slightly more attenuated and tapered. That is a detail I have no memory of now, but it was probably based on my notes on this individual.

Also apparent on take-off was the absence of a rufous blaze on the 'shoulders' – I looked for this specifically as a diagnostic feature of Painted BQ, and given the views I had (both on take-off and when the bird was side-on before landing), I am confident the marking was absent. The saddle (i.e. mantle and upper back) looked darker brown than the rump. My Wingspan article notes "my best views suggested that this effect was caused by elongate dark patches or streaks on the scapulars and

back". That's not something I remember clearly now, but it would have been based on this individual.

As flight levelled off and wing-beats slowed, I focussed on wing-pattern: the most striking feature was near-black primaries and secondaries forming a dark trailing edge that contrasted strongly with the paler wing-coverts. The Wingspan article has detail on wing-covert pattern that I do not remember now; all I can remember is that the wing-coverts formed a paler panel, contrasting with both the flight feathers and the darker saddle.

As the bird curved left (at quite long range) I had reasonable views of the underparts, which were very plain and pale; I remember them as buffish grading to a whitish belly. The rear-flanks (also visible on takeoff) were buffy rather than clean white. The breast was seen adequately; it lacked the grey ground colour and pale spots of a Painted Button-quail.

The bird was quite a long way off before it was side-on enough to look at head pattern; all I can remember is disappointment when I lost the bird behind trees while I was trying to make out its bill shape. I've no idea what the eye colour was.

No flight call was given by the bird. I didn't hear a booming button-quail call at the site – or for other on any of the other days of the fieldtrip.

IDENTIFICATION

Although I only had flight views and was unable to see some key ID features (e.g. long heavy bill, yellow iris) I am confident the bird I saw was a Buff-breasted Button-quail. It was clearly not a Brown Quail (pale sandy rump, contrasting dark remiges, no flight call on take-off) and it was much larger than a Little Button-quail, without contrasting white flanks. The notes below are therefore confined to differences from Painted Button-quail:

- Light sandy rufous rump. I consider this diagnostic. The rump of Painted Button-Quail has a greyish-brown to brown ground colour with fine black markings; to my eyes, in the field it looks a little greyer than one would expect on the basis of examination of feather pattern. I've never seen a Painted Button-quail with a rump pattern that looked light sandy rufous, or with a rump that looked obviously paler than the saddle. At the time of the sighting I was spending a lot of time with Painted Button-quail. I'd seen them a few minutes before flushing the Buff-breasted; I also watched them in Victoria in the week before (as preparation for the Buff-breasted adventure) and the week after, as I already had an ID article in mind at that point.
- Strongly contrasting near-black primaries and secondaries. The remiges of Painted Button-quail are similar in colour, but they do not contrast nearly so strongly with the wing-coverts.
- Wing-covert panel distinctly paler than both the flight feathers and the saddle.
- Lack of rufous blaze on the shoulders. I looked specifically for this marking and am confident that in the views I had, I would have seen it if present, especially as the size indicates the bird was a female.
- Plain, pale unpatterned underparts, with no sign of greyness or spottiness on the breast.
- Rear-flanks buffish rather than clean white.