

Brown Quail

Synoicus ypsilophorus

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Hunter Bird
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A Brown Quail on Broughton Island (photo: Alan Stuart)

The Brown Quail is a large, plump ground-dwelling bird, occurring in grasslands and shrublands. When undisturbed, it can offer excellent views to an observer. However, often the views are quite limited – occurring when a single bird or a group of them erupts from near the feet of a walker and takes off noisily.

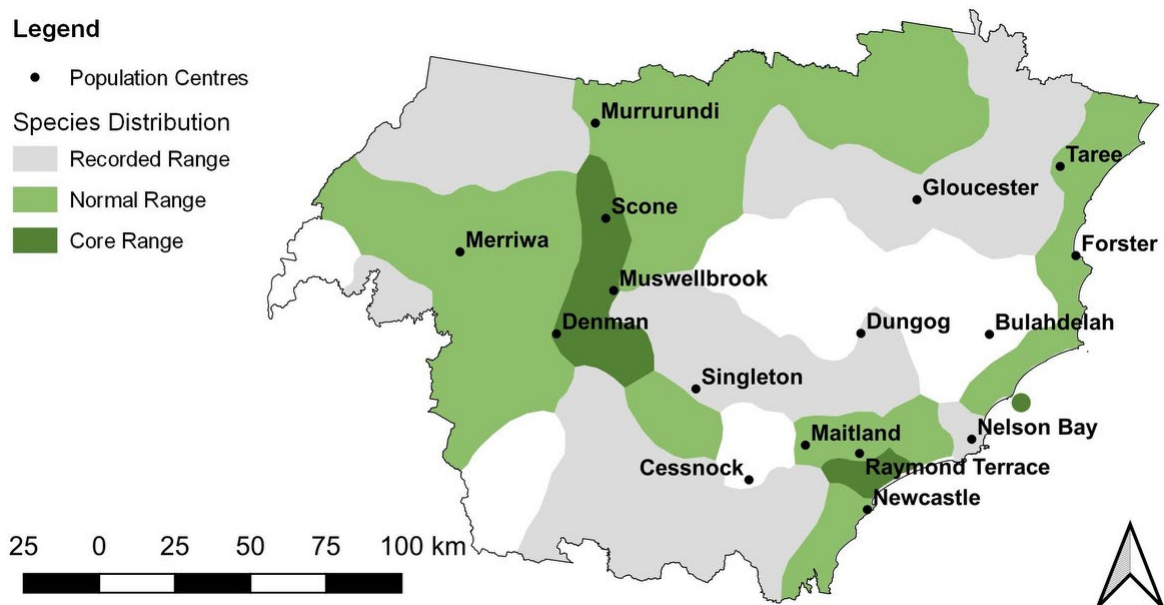
Males and females are similar – a small plain head on a plump body, brown or rufous plumage with fine white streaking on the upperparts, wavy black barring on the underparts, yellow legs, dark ear spot, small bill. A bird with rufous plumage is most probably a male, and a few males have a blue-grey plumage.

The main confusion species is the similarly-sized Stubble Quail. However, that species has a prominent white supercilium and heavily streaked underparts,

and the males have an orange or rufous face and throat. The two species have very different calls (a plaintive whistle for the Brown Quail), and they also can be differentiated in flight. The Brown Quail is more likely to flush noisily (calling, and its wings clattering), it rises steeply to 1-2m above ground, flies a relatively short distance and lands with a sloping approach (whereas the Stubble Quail rises more slowly, often flies faster and further, and lands by braking and dropping tail-first).

Regional Status

This is a widespread resident of our region, with many breeding records. It is absent from higher altitude locations, which is interesting as in New Zealand it has been recorded at 3,600m – probably that was not in rainforest though.



Distribution map for Brown Quail (map prepared by Dan Williams)

Sub-species

There are ten sub-species of Brown Quail ([Animal Diversity Web https://animaldiversity.org](https://animaldiversity.org)) but only two of those occur in Australia. The larger Tasmanian Brown Quail (sub-species *ypsilophorus*, with a yellow iris) is limited to Tasmania and some nearby islands, while the Mainland Brown Quail (sub-species *australis*, with a red iris) is widespread in tropical and temperate shrublands and grasslands in mainland Australia and many offshore islands.

A group of quails

It is reasonably common to find several quail together, although sometimes only 1-2 of them will flush and be seen by an observer. In the breeding

season, the flock usually is a family group – Brown Quail are monogamous and they produce large broods. However, in the remainder of the year it is a gregarious species especially where there is a good food supply available.

The most commonly used term for a group of quail is a covey. That is an Old English word for any group of small gamebirds, such as quail or partridge. A less frequently used term is a bevy – which is another old term for groups of birds, particularly quail.



Part of a covey of Brown Quail at Tomago Wetland (photo: Rob Palazzi)

Quails and Button-quails

Australia has three native quail species and seven species of button-quail. All ten species have similar habits – they are cryptic birds, mainly ground-dwelling and occurring in grasslands and shrublands. However, the two groups of birds are not related and there are some important differences between them. Button-quails are more closely related to shorebirds. Quails have a hind toe but button-quails do not. Button-quails are sexually dimorphic, with the females being larger than the males and usually more brightly coloured.

About the name

Brown Quail

The word “quail” has Germanic origins and is alleged to be onomatopoeic for a call of the European Quail (resembling a “kwak”, basically). However, as the European Quail sounds somewhat like a Stubble Quail, that explanation seems lacking. Most quails are brown or brownish, so the use of “brown” in the bird’s name isn’t particularly useful. However, the Brown Quail is perhaps the plainest coloured of any member of the extended quail family. Latham (1801) named it as the New Holland Quail, which seems a more appropriate name; however, the common usage by early settlers was to call the bird the Brown Quail and that name stuck.

Synoicus ypsilophorus

The genus name is from the Greek word *sunoikos* meaning “living together”, and relates to how members of this genus are often present together in large groups. The species name derives from the Greek letter *upsilon* (which is equivalent to the letter Y in our modern alphabet) and the Greek word *phoros*, meaning “bearing” or “carrying”. Thus, it is the Y-bearing bird; this relates to the bird’s breast markings, which somewhat resemble a Y.



A Brown Quail on Ash Island (photo: Mick Roderick)

information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999) • James Jobling (2010). Helm Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names plus handy advice from Harold Tarrant.

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