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VALIDITY OF THE BUFF-BREASTED QUAIL

J. D. Macdonald

In 1899 Mr. E. Olive of Queensland sent to the Liverpool Museum in England a small collection of birds stated to be from Cooktown. Among them was a button-quail or bustard-quail (the former is the older name and is of Anglo-Indian origin) which Mr. H. C. Robinson (1900) of that museum described as a new species with the names Buff-breasted Quail and *Turnix olivii*. In referring to the species in the following year Robinson and Laverock (1900) noted that the bird "seems to have been hitherto confounded with *T. castanota*." An element of that confusion still remains.

For some time *T. olivii* was accepted as a valid species, by Mathews for example, who put both *olivii* and *castanota* into a genus separate from *T. varia*, the Painted Quail; by the R.A.O.U. Checklist Committee, who listed it with spelling *T. olivei*; and by others: Peters (1934) in his 'Birds of the World' made it a race of *T. castanota* and this ruling has been accepted by some people but by no means everybody. Such divided opinion is confusing. The purpose of this note is to show that Peters' conclusion is not the most satisfactory one.

In the first place I think it is important to consider *T. olivii* in relation to *T. varia* as well as *T. castanota*. The three forms, *varia*, *olivii* and *castanota* replace each other geographically with *olivii* between the other two (fig. 1). This fact and their close similarity suggests that they are recent offshoots from the same stock. The question is, how far they have diverged and which taxonomic category is most appropriate to each? There are few yardsticks which can be applied other than morphological ones. Physical proximity is closest between *olivii* and *varia* whereas *castanota* is separated from *olivii* by the greater part of the Gulf country. In fact, *varia* and *olivii* are recorded from Cooktown but the preciseness of this sympatry can be questioned. Olive obtained at different times the type of *olivii* and a specimen of *varia* to which Mathews gave the subspecific name *subminuta*, a form not now accepted. Both types are in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and I am indebted to Dr. Dean Amadon for the following information extracted from the labels:-

*Turnix olivii*. Cooktown; June 25, 1894: 0; iris yellow; feet yellow; bill brown.

*Turnix varia subminuta*. Cooktown; March 18, 1900: 0; iris red; feet yellow; bill black, slate under; food seeds.

Where exactly Olive found the birds is not recorded and would be difficult to establish. It seems unlikely that they were taken in the town but somewhere in the surrounding country. There are no subsequent records of either from anywhere near Cooktown. There are accounts of *olivii* at Coen and of *varia* on the Atherton Tableland, but neither

was recorded in the Cooktown-Laura area by Storr (1953). Mrs. H. B. Gill of Innisfail tells me that, in the north, *varia* is a high country species. Perhaps therefore it extends from the Atherton Tableland along the Main Coast Range to northern limits in Big Tableland just south of Cooktown. Similarly *olivii* probably extends south in lower habitats to the Cooktown area. But that is speculation; certain information is required. It would be convenient to accept the yardstick of sympatry to declare that *olivii* and *varia* must be separate species but I do not think that situation has been established clearly.

It seems therefore that an estimate of relationship between *varia*, *olivii* and *castanota* has to be based mainly on morphology. Dimensions of females, as measured by Mathews, are:-

	<i>varia</i>	<i>olivii</i>	<i>castanota</i>
Length.....	190	190	162
Bill .....	18	21	16
Wing .....	108	106	85
Tail .....	43	42	37
Tarsus .....	23	25	19

These figures show that *varia* and *olivii* are closely similar in all respects except bill size, which is longer in *olivii*; and that *castanota* is smaller but proportionately similar to *varia*, with slightly longer bill.

Other features are:-

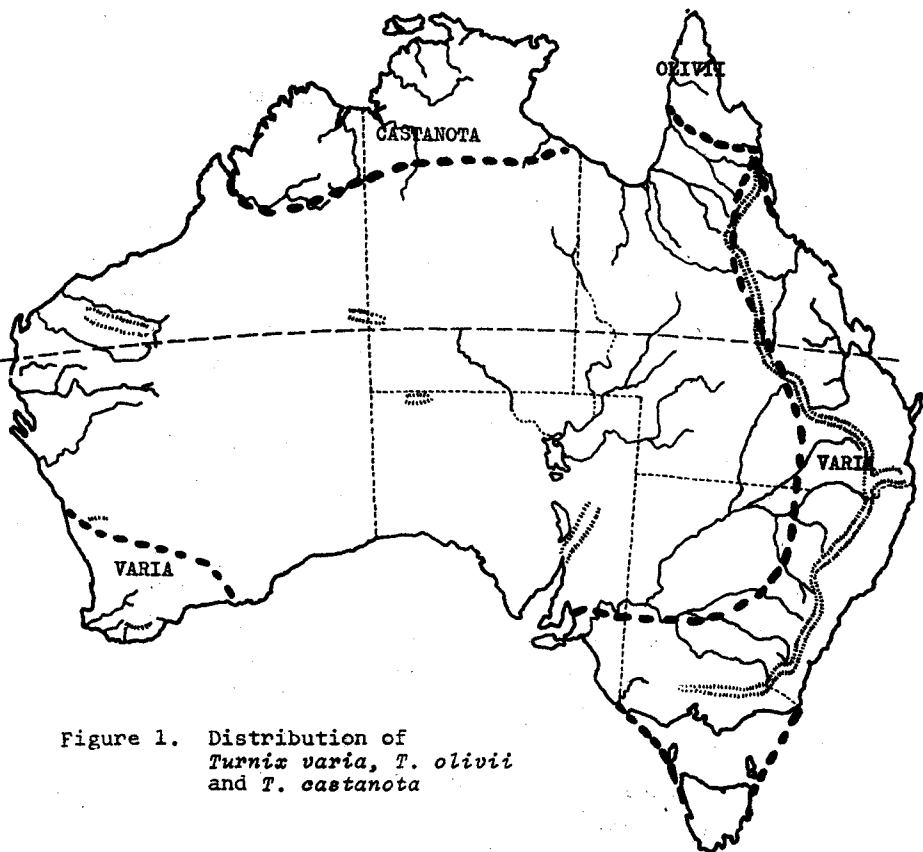


Figure 1. Distribution of *Turnix varia*, *T. olivii* and *T. castanota*

	<i>varia</i>	<i>olivii</i>	<i>castanota</i>
Breast	medium grey with large pale spots	unspotted pale buff olive	medium grey with small white spots
Forehead and face	speckled white	very few white speckles	speckled white
Rump	purplish grey	reddish brown	reddish brown

This morphological evidence seems to point to *olivii* being rather closer in affinity to *varia* than to *castanota*, and also that *olivii* is sufficiently distinct to be regarded as a species, at least until more information can be obtained about the relationship of *olivii* and *varia* in the Cooktown area. The three forms can be regarded as semi-species in a super-species.

As a corollary to this note, *Turnix varia* is listed as a divided species with a race in New Caledonia. In my opinion the New Caledonia form differs in greater degree from *varia* than either *olivii* or *castanota*. It should be listed as a separate species, or at most a semi-species in the Australian super-species group. In this event the Painted Quail, Buff-breasted Quail and Chestnut-backed Quail are to be recognised as species endemic to Australia.

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## MORE OBSERVATIONS AT OPALTON

A. C. M. Griffin

Brigadier Officer (*Sunbird* 1(3): 64-66) urges observers to follow up the unidentified bird seen by himself and Mrs. Gill in the Opalton area in June 1970, where the Rufous-crowned Emu-Wren *Stipiturus ruficeps* had recently been found by Mr. Ellis Tucker. Mr. J. D. Macdonald has now identified by field observation and a collected specimen, the Striated Grass-Wren, *Amytornis striatus*, from the same area (*Sunbird* 1(4): 92-96). Mrs. H. B. Gill and I camped from 25.9.70 to 27.9.70 at the foot of a low rise, between two and three miles south-east of the old water tank which appears to be the sole indication that one has reached Opalton. Observations that we made that weekend may also be of interest.

Our camp was in an area of stony, red soil surrounded by a low, rocky range. The vegetation was dominated by spinifex (porcupine grass - *Triodia* sp.) and scattered mallee type eucalypts, with a few clumps of gidgee (*Acacia homalophylla*). Spinifex and a small leafed, dense, low growing bush competed with each other in the dry creek beds.

We were luckier than Mr. Macdonald in that the Striated Grass-Wren we disturbed in the dry creek bed about half a mile from our camp, flew up on to a low branch of a mallee type eucalypt bordering the creek, only about 10 feet from us and perched there with its long tail erect for several seconds. While it investigated us we were able to have a good look at it. The bold, black facial line

extending from the base of the bill behind the eye and ear coverts was very noticeable. It contrasted markedly with the white streaked, red-brown head and back. The only call we heard was a wren like trill. It was this that drew our attention to the bird on the third occasion when it suddenly appeared, racing along ahead of us through the spinifex clumps. It seemed reluctant to fly, only lowering its tail and using its wings as a last resort to gain the shelter of its chosen clump of spinifex. The chance sighting of another Striated Grass-Wren about 8 miles further west along the Opalton road, suggests that this species may be fairly widely distributed wherever suitable habitat occurs in central west Queensland. This may also apply to the Rufous-crowned Emu-Wren. Two pairs were seen adjacent to our camp at Opalton and a third bird was seen some distance away. In addition to these a beautifully plumaged male bird was seen in similar country about 19 miles south of Winton, approximately 10 miles south on the Stonehenge road from where it forks left from the Jundah road. This is at least 50 miles north of the Opalton sighting.

Among other birds which we saw, Hall's Babblers (*Pomatostomus halli*), a pair of Redthroats (*Pyrrholaemus brunneus*), and a party of about eight Plumed Pigeons (*Lophophaps plumifera*) seen between the main Stonehenge road and Opalton warrant special mention. Plumed Pigeons were also heard near our camp on the evening we arrived.

The Hall's Babblers were in a red, rocky range about half a mile south-west of our camp. Their uniform dark brown colouring, relieved only by the white bib-like throat and breast and the broad white eyebrow, easily

distinguished them from other babblers. A party of eight was seen and on the first morning they were carrying sticks to a partially built nest at the top of a mulga-gidgee type of *Acacia*. The predominant *Acacia* on this range differed from others in having vertical, spine-like foliage, giving it a vaguely crew cut appearance. In the wide gullies on the top of the range it grows to 15 or 20 feet, and it was in the tops of these taller trees that the Hall's Babblers were sighted. Their nest was smaller and neater than that of the Grey-crowned Babbler. Similar *Acacia* in scrub about 12 miles south of Winton on the Stonehenge road also had a number of neat babblers' nests but the area was reached at dusk and the birds were not about. It seems possible that this may be another colony of Hall's Babblers.

The Redthroat was in the same area as the Hall's Babblers. Its lovely little song first attracted our attention. It was then located and watched for some minutes as it flew busily back and forth carrying food between the top of the ridge and the gully. In the gullies on the south side of the range the *Acacia* is replaced by a variety of small, low growing bushes, which are quite dense in places. It was so much like the type of country in which these birds occur in north west Victoria and in Palm Valley in the Northern Territory that it seemed quite natural to see them there. Mrs. Gill pointed out however, that we were at least three hundred miles from previous published sightings of Redthroats. It would be interesting to know whether other observers have recorded Redthroats in central west Queensland.



Many questions remain unanswered. This fascinating area south of Winton warrants more than a stolen weekend and while it seems likely that Brigadier Officer's unidentified object was the Striated Grass-Wren, there is a lot of spinifex in the area and a Spinifex Bird could well be skulking in one of those clumps.

Other birds seen in the area included - Common Bronzewing (nesting), Ring-neck Parrots (one pair), Owlet Nightjar, Purple-backed Wren, Inland Thornbill, Shrike Thrush (? Grey), White-winged Sittellas (party of five), Singing Honeyeater, Grey-headed Honeyeater, Striped Honeyeater, Little Woodswallow, White-browed Woodswallow and Masked Woodswallow. Between Winton and Opalton, a pair of Spotted Harriers and a party of Chestnut-tailed Thornbills were observed.

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#### LITTLE GRASSBIRD IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

H. B. Gill

As the published records of the occurrence of Little Grass-bird *Megalurus gramineus* in Queensland seem to be extremely few, the following locations where I have seen them may be of interest.

Bromfields Swamp and Willits Swamp on the Atherton Tableland.

Eubenangee Swamp, near Innisfail.

Along the East Leichhardt River about 17 miles east of Mt. Isa.

Along a bore drain twenty miles east of Julia Creek.

Nonda bore drain between Richmond and Julia Creek.

The three last named places are all heavily infested with Cumbungi (*Typha angustifolia*) along the edges of the water.

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#### FIELD NOTES ON SOME WADERS OBSERVED DURING THE 1970/71 SEASON

Ivan Fien

Some brief notes are presented on the occurrence of some of the more interesting species of waders, both endemic and migratory, observed in the Brisbane area, September, 1970 to March, 1971.

*Charadrius cinctus*, Red-kneed Dotterel. Noted in relatively large numbers at McKey's farm, Deepwater Bend. Thirty birds were counted on 5.9.70 and a similar number on 3.10.70. Since this swamp provides good cover and inaccessible areas, it is probable that more were present.

*Charadrius leschenaultii*, Large Sand Dotterel. More than the usual number have been noted this year, usually in company with *C. mongolus*. Specific records were: Deception Bay, 3.1.71, 27.2.71; Thornside, 1.2.71; Southport Spit, 13.2.71.

*Tringa stagnatilis*, Marsh Sandpiper. Deepwater Bend, 5.9.70, 3.10.70; Nudgee Beach (mangrove swamp), 23.1.71.

*Tringa glareola*, Wood Sandpiper. Two Wood Sandpipers were observed in flooded tussock grass at Deepwater Bend on 16.1.71. One was watched through a telescope for 15 minutes and the two were then flushed and the plumage pattern noted in flight. The species has previously been noted by the writer in similar habitat at the same location on several occasions.

*Tringa hypoleucos*, Common Sandpiper. While observing massed waders at Thornside at high tide on 1.2.71 with Barry Morgan and David Perkins, a lone wader feeding along a drain was noted. Closer observation through telescopes revealed the bird as a Common Sandpiper. The diagnostic features of white orbital ring, white supercilliary stripe, white mark at shoulder and habit of teetering were noted.

*Xenus cinereus*, Terek Sandpiper. The Terek Sandpiper is not a rare wader on our shores in the summer but it is not usually noted in large numbers. This summer has produced the largest concentrations of the species I have yet seen. They have been particularly numerous at Deception Bay and Thornside where the habitat is apparently favourable. I saw between 50 and 100 birds at Thornside on 1.2.71. Barry Morgan informed me that he counted a high tide concentration of 350 at Thornside on 31.1.71.

*Calidris canutus*, Knot. One bird noted at Nudgee Beach, 23.1.71.

*Calidris tenuirostris*, Great Knot. I have noted more Great Knots this season than ever before. They have been seen right through the summer at Deception Bay, Nudgee Beach and Thornside in very good numbers (groups of up to 50 birds). On 27.2.71 at Deception Bay several birds were seen in fairly advanced breeding plumage.

*Calidris alba*, Sanderling. On 13.2.71 on the western side of Southport Spit a group of 20 Sanderlings were noted in company with other waders including Mongolian Dotterels, Large Sand Dotterels and Little Stints. They were kept under observation for some minutes and then flushed. After alighting they were watched and subsequently flushed again.

*Limosa limosa*, Black-tailed Godwit. Two sightings this season up to the end of February, 1971. Forty birds were noted and photographed on the tide flats at Deception Bay on 3.1.71, and one bird was seen on the wing in company with congener *L. lapponica* in the marshes of Hay's Inlet on 27.2.71. The sighting at Deception Bay was interesting as it was the first time I had seen *L. limosa* on the tide flats. All previous sightings have been in swamp or marsh environment. However, the species could be confused with *L. lapponica* on the sea shore except when in flight when it becomes extremely obvious.

*Esacus magnirostris*, Beach Stone-Curlew. Two Beach Stone-Curlews, which gave the impression of being a mated pair, were seen in the sand dunes at the northern end of the Southport Spit on 13.2.71. The birds allowed an approach to about 75 m but no further; they appeared quite unconcerned however, provided the observers came no closer.

One bird occupied itself in preening its breast feathers while the other bobbed occasionally like a giant Common or Wood Sandpiper. The birds were watched intermittently for about an hour and showed no signs of wishing to leave the area. They were still present when the observers left.

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#### COLOUR CHANGES

Nancy Hopkins

While bird-watching at Brookfield, Mrs. Dunkley, Miss Hawken and myself spotted a Leaden Flycatcher moving with trembling tail through the branches of a tree. When it turned to face us we were surprised to see that its rusty breast was bordered with a firm and bold black band, similar to that on the breast of a Rufous Whistler except that the 'bib' above it was pale rust instead of white. Presumably our bird was a young male undergoing colour change, but surely the well-defined and handsome pattern was something of a fluke. To the best of my recollection the few young males I have seen at this stage have had the black coming through in uneven patches, as in various other species such as wrens and koels.

The migrant waders are now displaying fascinating stages of breeding plumage and we (Miss Hawken and I)

were especially impressed by Golden Plovers seen at Cleveland on March 7th. The first bird noticed was typical of a bird in almost full breeding plumage, back strongly mottled with a golden wash, face and underparts largely black. A second bird had much lighter mottling on the back, and no black whatever elsewhere, but it was far removed from its sandy non-breeding colouring being richly washed with gold with a beautiful golden head. Other members of the Wild Life Preservation Society reported a similar bird further along the beach.

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#### NOTES FOR JUNIORS

Nancy Hopkins

This is an exciting time of the year for bird-watchers, because the migrating birds are moving northwards. Will the Juniors please keep watch and help us to gather information?

We have two main classes of migrants. One class, which includes most of our sea-shore waders, breeds in the Northern Hemisphere as far north as Siberia and Alaska, during the northern summer, which is our winter. When winter comes to the north these birds fly south across the equator to share our summer. While with us they are drab coloured in sandy browns and greys, but in their breeding season their plumage becomes much more striking. Some are already changing colour before they begin the

long journey to their nesting places, and recently we have seen many transformed in their brighter plumage on our beaches. Soon they will all be gone, except for a few that may spend the winter here and will not breed this year.

The waders are hard to identify and not easy to watch and I suspect that our junior members will be more interested in the second group. The birds of this group remain in the Southern Hemisphere, but they travel south in the summer and in winter return north to New Guinea and other islands, or merely to the northern parts of Australia. Among others, the Dollar-bird, Koel, Channel-billed Cuckoo and Shining Starling leave the Australian mainland altogether. Some of the Rainbow-birds (Bee-eaters) go as far as the Islands, but many stay in Australia, though they probably all move northward. The same applies to the Sacred and Forest Kingfishers.

We do not know as much as we would like to about bird migration, and it is helpful to know when birds first appear in various districts, and when they leave. Early last September Graeme Stevens of Dundowran near Maryborough told me that there were Dollar-birds around his home. This was interesting because it was unusually early.

Now this is what I want our Juniors to do. Please make a note of any migrants you may see. Write down dates, numbers and anything you think interesting, and when you are ready, write and tell me about it. If you know the difference, tell us whether the bird was male or female, adult or juvenile. For instance, among the last of the Dollar-birds there are many with dark bills

instead of red. These are young birds. A Koel which looks like a female but has big patches of black is a young male just changing to his adult colouring.

Some of our flycatchers are migrants, so flycatcher news will be welcome too. North Queensland members may have something to tell us about the departure of the Shining Starlings.

Even one little note is worth sending. In fact, I want to hear about all of your bird-watching, not only of the migrants. Please ask questions if you have any problems, and write as often as you wish. One thing more, if you have already missed the last of the migrants, get ready to watch for their return in September.

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