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The Diminutive Button Quail

by Nancy Vigran, Exeter, California

With the development of new mutations and colors has come a surge of interest in Button Quail *Coturnix chinensis*. Growing while standing on their tip-toes these five inch giants resemble a showy game cock announcing his presence. An added attraction to any aviary, Button Quail prove a challenge for experienced aviculturists and a pleasure for the novice.

Button Quail, also known as Chinese Painted Quail, are the smallest member of the quail family. They are native to India, China, Indonesia, and Australia, and are commonly bred in captivity in the U.S.

Dimorphic, the male Button Quail is brown, black and gray with chestnut feathers in the breast and on the abdomen. A black and white pattern lines the cheeks and throat.

The female is predominately brown and beige with dark barring on the breast. Both males and females have black bills and yellow legs.

Buttons can be kept in small family units with two or three females to each male, but they have a better chance of hatching their own young when kept one pair per flight. Some hens are more broody then others and it may take several clutches of eggs for a pair to actually brood them into hatching - but the reward of watching the young learn the how-tos of life from their parents is well worth the wait.

There are many variations of a nesting house for Button Quail, but more times then not the hen will lay her eggs outside anyway. Aviaries planted with tall grass are ideal for breeding Button Quail. They will nest in dirt-lined aviaries if you develop a small straw nest in the corner or against a wall of the flight. The hen will lay 8-10 eggs, which she will primarily incubate with her mate close by, standing guard. Incubation lasts about 16 days.

Hatchlings are smaller than the average little finger tip and resemble honey bees in coloration. They grow quickly and become independent by about four weeks. Their parents never feed them, but teach them the ins-and-outs of hunting for insects and pecking for food.

I have found it necessary to wrap my aviaries with 18-inch wide window screening around the bottom to prevent babies from wandering through the 1/2-inch wide wire. While the very young will never wander far from their mother, they are easy prey for a cat, dog, hawk, or almost anything else outside the safety of their aviary.

Another added precaution is to use shallow water dishes lined with marbles when young are due to hatch. Because of their diminutive size, young can easily drown if wading in too deep and then fighting to get out. Marbles give them something to walk on while still keeping water in the dish.

Hatchlings should be offered hard-boiled eggs and wheat or whole-grain bread crumbs which their parents will teach them to eat. Small or chopped mealworms and flightless fruit flies are relished and provide another good source of protein for the developing chicks. As they mature into adult birds, they will eat finch mix comprised of small millet, canary and rape seeds.

If Button Quail do not have access to dirt in their aviaries, they should be offered grit or ground oyster shell to aide in digestion and offer a variety of minerals. As with other birds, it never hurts to use a calcium supplement in the food or water, especially for producing hens and young growing chicks. Greens are also welcomed especially dandelions, chickweed, carrot tops and romaine lettuce - shredded or chopped into small one-quarter to one-half inch pieces.



Normal cock Button Quail.



Silver hen with chicks.



Red-breasted cock and a silver hen

Once the young are independent, they should be removed from their parents. Fathers can turn against their sons as the boys reach maturity.

When raised together, Button Quail usually remain tolerant of other adult birds. But it is not easy to introduce more than one adult male to a flight. Adult females can also be aggressive toward one another.

While Button Quail are not known for flying, they can take to the wing when frightened. They are notorious for hurting themselves—hitting heads, bashing beaks or catching wings when scared. It is best to move slowly in a flight with Button Quail as with all birds.

Button Quail can be housed with any type of bird that will not harm them including finches, many softbills, Cockatiels and the smaller grass parakeets. If you want them to produce, make sure you don't house them with a species, such as the Pekin Robin, that may break their eggs.

Many Button Quail breeders artificially incubate eggs and start the young out in brooders. As with many game birds, this is fairly easy to do, but I feel that it tends to produce young females who inheritably are not incubators. These hens will lay fertile eggs, but may strew them around the aviary, never setting in one spot to develop a nest.

The most difficult part of artificial incubation comes with the young hatchlings learning how to eat. It is best if you have a "teen-aged" bird who will hunt and peck, and teach them the ropes. It is not easy for a human parent to teach hatchlings the hunt-and-peck method and adult Button Quail will either ignore or attack them.

Some friends of mine sprinkle poppy seeds on top of hard boiled eggs with the theory that the small black specks will attract the babies. It works for them.

In the past five to 10 years, many new mutations have arisen in Button Quail. Besides the normal coloration and common silvers, others available include the red-breasted, albino, and pided. They may cost a little more, but many people enjoy the variety they offer in their aviaries. 