

First Hunter Region breeding record for Red-chested Button-quail

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In this note I report the first confirmed breeding record for Red-chested Button-quail *Turnix pyrrhоторax* in the Hunter Region of New South Wales. The breeding record was at Cattle Lane, Parraweena (GPS co-ordinates 31°41.76' S, 150°30.42' E). Cattle Lane is accessed via Merriwa Road approximately 27 km west of Willow Tree on the New England Highway (**Figure 1**).

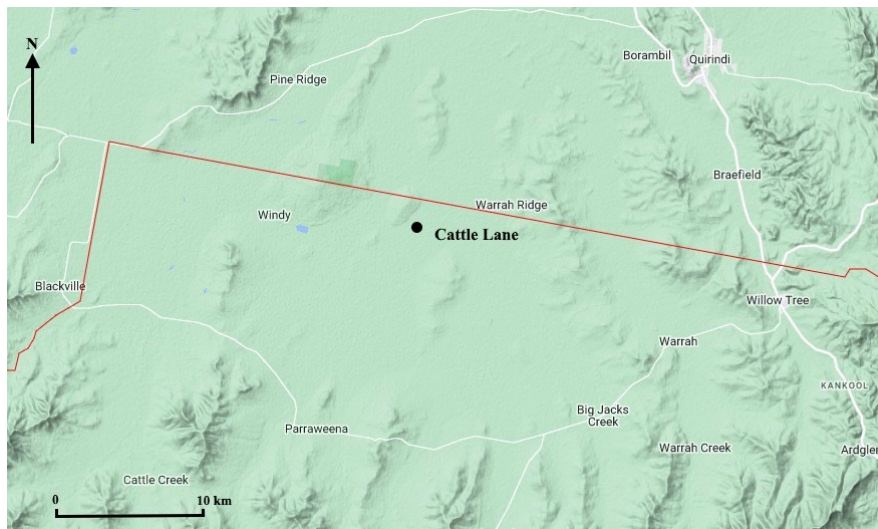


Figure 1. Location map for Red-chested Button-quail site, Cattle Lane, Parraweena, NSW, also showing the Hunter Region northern border (red). Source <https://birddata.birdlife.org.au/home>

OBSERVATIONS

From December 2020 through January 2021 there was an irruption of seed-eating birds on the Liverpool Plains in the north-west of the Hunter Region (Williams in prep.). Most sightings were concentrated around Cattle Lane where weather conditions had been ideal for wheat and other grain crops to be planted and thrive. I visited Cattle Lane on 10 December 2020, arriving around 6 pm and staying for more than two hours. In that time, I recorded the following seed-eating birds: Stubble Quail *Coturnix pectoralis* five birds; Little Button-quail *Turnix velox* five birds; Red-chested Button-quail *Turnix pyrrhоторax* 25 birds. In addition to the birds seen, there were many Stubble Quail calling.

I saw many Red-chested Button-quail and Stubble Quail feeding on, and just off, the edge of the dirt road. Also, a male Red-chested

Button-quail was having a dust bath on the road. Around 8 pm another male Red-chested Button-quail emerged from the verge onto the road, with three chicks stumbling along with him. I was able to obtain photographs (**Figures 2 and 3**) before the four birds disappeared into the grass on the other side.



Figure 2. Male Red-chested Button-quail with three chicks, crossing Cattle Lane in December 2020 (photo: author).



Figure 3. Two of the Red-chested Button-quail chicks at Cattle Lane in December 2020 (photo: author).

DISCUSSION

The Red-chested Button-quail is endemic to northern, eastern and inland Australia (Marchant & Higgins 1993). In NSW, although rare and often overlooked as they are nocturnal/crepuscular, it has been recorded in every region of the state although the majority of reports are from the Western Slopes and Riverine Plains regions (Cooper *et al.* 2016). The preferred habitats in NSW are areas of dense ground cover such as grasslands and crops; it can also be found in low open shrublands of, for example, saltbush and bluebush (Cooper *et al.* 2016).

Hunter Region records are uncommon. A specimen was collected by John Gould in the Upper Hunter in 1839 although he was not the first to record the species as he had already received a male bird from Charles Coxen that was collected somewhere on the Liverpool Plains (Cooper *et al.* 2016). However, during the period from 1993-2019 of the Hunter Region Bird Reports there were only three accepted records, involving four birds overall: an adult female and immature male at Widden Valley 2 October 2005; a female bird at Wingen 31 October to 1 November 2008; a female bird at Hexham Swamp 28 December 2017 (Williams in prep.). There has never before been a report of Red-chested Button-quail breeding in the Hunter Region.

There are scattered breeding records from throughout this species' range (Marchant & Higgins 1993; Cooper *et al.* 2016). In northern

Australia nesting was reported to occur from February to July as well as late September, though for southern Australia breeding occurs from September to February (Cooper *et al.* 2016). The 2020 Cattle Lane breeding record fits with the latter view. However, Beruldsen (2003) suggested that the Red-chested Button-quail may breed in any month following sufficient inland rain to produce good grass growth.

The breeding biology of the Red-chested Button-quail is not well understood. It is reported to be polyandrous, with the male solely caring for the eggs and young (Marchant & Higgins 1993). However, a female was observed attending four chicks in June 1998 and captive females have been observed incubating eggs and participating in the rearing of young (Emmerson 1999). My sighting was of a male with chicks, which fits with the general view.

During the 2020/2021 summer irruption of seed-eating birds at Cattle Lane, there were several records of Stubble Quail breeding there (Williams in prep.). Given the numbers of Red-chested Button-quail present during my December 2020 visit, it seems likely that there was more than one breeding event for the latter species as well.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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