

## Notes on Small Buttonquail *Turnix sylvaticus* in Khirasara vidi, near Rajkot

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### Introduction

The Small Buttonquail (*Turnix sylvaticus*) is a small sized buttonquail which is resident in India. In the north-western part of the country in Gujarat, Rajasthan and adjoining regions, it is a summer visitor or monsoon breeding migrant (Grimmett *et al.* 2011). For Gujarat, it is given as an uncommon monsoon / breeding migrant, regular in the grasslands of Saurashtra and Kachchh (Ganpule 2016). The Small Buttonquail is known to occur in Khirasara vidi, and in other vidis in Saurashtra in the monsoon (Mashru 2017). It is a secretive species, and has been less studied in Gujarat. I present here observations on the Small Buttonquail, made over three years of study at Khirasara vidi, near Rajkot, Gujarat.

### Observations

I regularly visit Khirasara vidi, which is a grassland near Rajkot. The vidi is typical savannah grassland, interspersed with trees, and is spread over more than 450 hectares. In the monsoon, there is a profusion of grass growth and the whole area turns green. The roads in the vidi are all that remain uncovered by grass. I first observed a Small Buttonquail at Khirasara vidi at the start of the monsoon season in June 2018. I initially mistook it for the Barred Buttonquail (*Turnix suscitator*), which is common here, but when I processed the photographs on my computer, I realised that it was a Small Buttonquail. I then started visiting the place more than four-five times a week in the monsoons and I observed and documented the Small Buttonquail here during my visits. The birds are usually seen singly or in pairs from early June, till about the second week of September, depending on the monsoon rains. The study was carried out in the monsoon months of 2018, 2019 and in 2020.

**Behaviour:** The Small Buttonquail is a secretive bird. It comes out, on the road, usually in the late evening, about half an hour before sunset. The birds often dust bathed on the road in the late evening and fed on the seeds of grasses and insects/invertebrates. If the conditions were overcast, then they can be seen on the road earlier in the evening and sometimes, even in the late afternoon. They are not disturbed by cars but often move quickly into the grass if approached on foot.

The monsoon season is the breeding season of this species and the Small Buttonquail breeds here in Khirasara vidi. When seen initially in June and July, single birds are often seen but in August and September, they are seen in pairs. Early in the monsoon, the calls of the Small Buttonquail are frequently heard in the vidi area. I have often seen the birds calling – the call is a booming *hoon hoon hoon* which is heard in the early

morning, afternoon or late evening at the start of the monsoon. The calling behaviour has been described by Ardesana & Bharad (2017), who observed it here in Khirasara vidi, and it is as described by the authors – the female puffs up her body and especially the nape (hindneck) and utters calls which are ventriloquial in character.



Photo 1

Raju Karia



Photo 2

Raju Karia

**Sexing:** Since I observed the Small Buttonquail, in pairs, many times over the past three years, I was able to take numerous photographs of the birds. In this species, the females are larger than the males; they are dominant and known to be polyandrous (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). I had the opportunity to study their movements and physical differences between the male and female for the past three years. Based on my observations, I noticed that the male is smaller in size and has pink or fleshy (pinkish-white) legs (Photo 1) while the female is bigger, more colourful and has grey or slaty legs (Photo 2). The difference in size is obvious

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when the pair is seen together. These observations of the birds in pairs were in the months of August and September in all three years from 2018 to 2020, which is their breeding season (Photo 3 & Photo 4). The plumage also differs, with the female having more rufous on hind-neck. The chest is also rufous in both species, but in the female, the colour is a richer rufous.



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**Breeding:** While it is known that the Small Buttonquail breeds here in Saurashtra and also in the Khirasara *vidi*, I have observed a presumed male with four chicks, only once, on 3 August 2019. I have never found a nest here but then, I have not looked for a nest actively since this could be disturbing to the nesting birds. When I saw the adult with chicks, it appeared on the road, and four chicks followed. They stayed on the road, in the open, looking for food and moved about on the road for a few moments and then disappeared into the

grass. The adult was quite wary, and constantly on the lookout for any danger. I quickly took some photos to document the adult with chicks (Photo 5). The plumage in juvenile was mottled, and the legs were pinkish, similar to an adult male. It is pertinent to note that in the Small Buttonquail, the polyandrous female lays eggs but the incubation and rearing of young is done by the male alone (Debus & Kirwan 2020).

## Discussion

It should be noted that none of the reference texts state the difference in leg colour for male and female. Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) state that the Small Buttonquail has 'pink, whitish or grey legs' while Grimmett *et al.* (2011) give 'legs pinkish or greyish' for this species and Debus & Kirwan (2020) state that legs are pale pinkish with yellow or blue tinge. Dharmakumarsinhji (1955) stated that 'legs in some birds are greyish and pink in others'. All these reference texts state that the female has brighter and more extensive rufous on hind-neck than the male. Ali & Ripley (1980) stated that the sexes were more or less alike and that the female was slightly larger. However, based on my observations over three years in Khirasara *vidi*, I could make out the difference in leg colour in the sexes. While ideally, the birds should be trapped and checked in-hand for sexing, the empirical evidence presented here suggests that the female has grey or slaty legs while the male has pinkish or fleshy legs and this feature, along with the plumage, can be used to sex the adult birds. I observed an adult, presumed male, accompanying four chicks; the adult had pink legs and the plumage was less colourful, indicating that it was a male – what further supports my observation that it was a male is that the male does the rearing of chicks and hence it is more likely that the adult accompanying the chicks was a male.

To further confirm whether leg colour can be used for sexing the adult birds, I checked photographs of the Small Buttonquail on the website 'Oriental Bird Images' (OBI) and 'eBird'. There are currently 40 photos of this species from India on OBI and 86 photos on 'eBird' and I checked each photo, especially wherein a pair is seen together. In such photos also, I observed that the female, which had a more vivid coloured plumage, had grey/pale slaty legs and the male had pinkish or fleshy legs, which is consistent with what I have observed here in Khirasara *vidi*. Regarding plumage, while the reference texts describe the female as having more rufous on hind-neck, the underparts are also a richer rufous in the female than the male. Though the male may also have a light rufous wash on the chest and upper belly, the colour in the female is brighter and richer rufous. This is given in Dharmakumarsinhji (1955), who



stated that the male is less richly coloured on the breast. Thus, plumage and colour of legs can be used to sex the adults in the field.

The breeding of the Small Buttonquail in Khirasara *vidi* is not surprising as it is known to breed in Saurashtra commonly (Dharmakumarsinghji 1955). The plumage in juveniles is not often photographed. While my observations of juveniles was limited to a sighting of four chicks together, my data, along with the photos posted on the different website of this species from India show that the leg colour in juvenile is pink or fleshy, and thus juveniles can be mistaken for adult male if the plumage is not properly observed. In juveniles, the white scalloping on the wings is more prominent and the mantle has more white fringes, and juveniles lack the broad pale streaks of adult. The size is smaller than in adult.

### Conclusion

The Small Buttonquail is a species which is quite difficult to study over long periods. It is secretive, quite wary and quickly disappears in the grass if there is even a hint of danger. Prolonged observations are difficult. Over the past three years, I have spent many days in the *vidi* during the monsoons in studying these birds and taking photographs. It is not rare, and there is a good population in the *vidi* area but, observing them is challenging. While the observations presented here need further confirmation, it is interesting to note that there is a distinct difference in plumage, as well as leg colour, in adult male and female. This information can be useful in sexing the birds in the field.

Khirasara *vidi* is an ideal area to study this species since the habitat is very good for the Small Buttonquail. Sustained

observations in the coming years will be helpful in knowing more about this secretive species. Many aspects of the species' biology are not known and whether it is a resident bird here or whether it arrives before the monsoon and departs after breeding is not clear. The breeding biology is also not well known. Sustained data should be gathered to know more about the Small Buttonquail in Saurashtra.

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## Sighting of Namaqua Dove *Oena capensis* at Nalsarovar: a second record for Gujarat

**Shabbir Belim & Mehmud Multani:** At – Nalsarovar.

On 1 November 2020, we were doing routine birding at Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary. At around 10:45 hrs, we observed a small dove perched on a *Prosopis juliflora* tree. On closer observation, we realised that it was not one of the common species of doves seen here. This bird had a long tail, with grey patch on the wings and black patches on the lower scapulars. The uppertail coverts had two dark bands. The bill was black and lores were dark. We identified this dove as a Namaqua Dove (*Oena capensis*) based on the above described features. It seemed to be a female or juvenile.

We posted information about this sighting on the social media, on Facebook and Whatsapp groups. Many bird

watchers visited the place and were able to see the individual well and photograph it here. It was seen in the same area for about three to four days. After that, it was not seen again.

A Namaqua Dove was recently seen in Khijadiya Bird Sanctuary, near Jamnagar, which was the first record of the species for Gujarat, as well as India (Trivedi & Trivedi 2018, Patel & Raol 2018); a detailed editor's note was given to explain why the record was considered to be of a genuine wild vagrant and not an escapee from the pet trade; it was included in the Gujarat checklist based on the Jamnagar record (Ganpule 2020). A recent paper on the range expansion of the Namaqua Dove in the Palearctic and South Asia explained the details