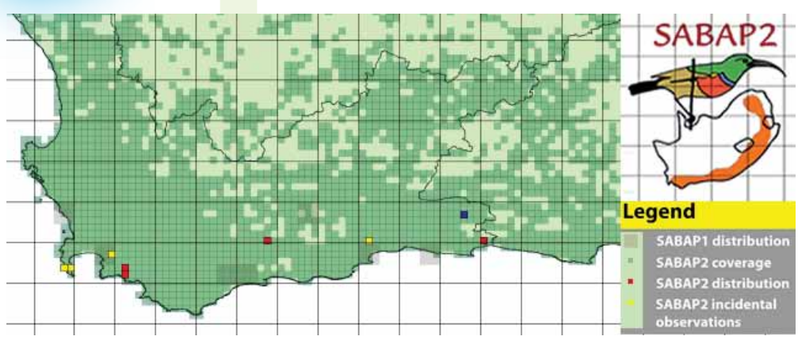
FYNBOS enigma

Hottentot Buttonquail in the Kouga Mountains

THE HOTTENTOT Buttonquail *Turnix hottentottus* is an elusive South African endemic and its true status is often debated. Although its plumage and eyes are lighter than those of the Black-rumped Buttonquail *T. nanus*, BirdLife International considers the two birds to be conspecific. This grouping is based on a 1993 *Checklist of Birds of the Afrotropical and Malagasy regions*, despite the fact that a split was mooted in *Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the New World* (1990).

All South Africa's prominent field guides consider the Hottentot Buttonquail to be distinct from the Black-rumped Buttonquail and accord it separate species status. While it is described in Sinclair and Hockey's *Birds of Southern Africa* as being 'locally common', it is categorised in *Roberts VII* as '… rare and highly localised, but may be more common than previously thought'. This is based on a 1994 survey, led by Peter Ryan and Phil Hockey at the Cape of Good Hope Nature Reserve, which estimated a population of 310 to 480 of these birds for the reserve, with the density in coastal renosterveld at one bird per 28 to 44 hectares. That would make it the third most common bird in this habitat type (more so than Levaillant's Cisticola and Yellow Bishop).



Yet SABAP2 data reflect only two pentads from the Peninsula, with incidental records in one of the most surveyed areas of the Western Cape. In fact, its SABAP2 distribution is one of the sparsest of any of South Africa's terrestrial bird species. The blue dot on the map indicates the location of the encounters discussed in this article. At the very least, the Hottentot Buttonquail may be the most thinly distributed of South Africa's endemic species, with four pentads with ad hoc records and only listed for four full-protocol pentads. In contrast to Ryan and Hockey's study, Mike Fraser's density estimate of 0.004 birds per hectare (data from his 1990 MSc) would mean there are no more than 400 individuals in the fynbos biome.

BirdLife South Africa's official checklists from 2011 to 2013 categorise the species as 'Probably Critically Endangered', while because of the lumped status, BirdLife International considers Hottentot/Black-rumped Buttonquail a species of 'Least Concern'. There is probably no other South African endemic as worthy of a focused study as to its identity and conservation status. We urgently need to discover what is happening to this species.

As part of the Fynbos Endemic Bird Survey, for over a year I have regularly hiked across mountains, collecting data on the six more common fynbos endemic birds, namely Cape Sugarbird, Orange-breasted Sunbird, Victorin's Warbler, Cape Siskin, Protea Seedeater and Cape Rockjumper. While I have occasionally flushed buttonquail-like birds, there has usually been too much doubt about the sighting to get positive species identification; for instance, a young Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix* could be the same size as a Hottentot Buttonquail. On only one occasion (while I was in the Kammanassie Mountains, near Uniondale, in December) have I been confident that I was listening to a buttonquail as the hooting was indistinguishable from the commercially available recording of the Black-rumped Buttonquail. However, I did not get a sighting and my curiosity was aroused.

In mid-March I searched for the species in the Gamkaberg Nature Reserve, based on a report by manager Tom Barry of birds calling from the top of this fynbos-covered hill in the middle of the Little Karoo in the Western Cape. Tom knows his local birds very well. I neither heard nor saw anything, despite undertaking a long hike in the dark with call-playback equipment, but I was probably too late in the season as both Tom and I had heard the birds in December.

THERE IS PROBABLY NO OTHER SOUTH AFRICAN ENDEMIC AS WORTHY OF A FOCUSED STUDY AS TO ITS IDENTITY AND CONSERVATION STATUS. **WE URGENTLY NEED TO DISCOVER WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THIS SPECIES**

A few weeks later, while on a transect over Naartjieskloofberg (1 340 metres above sea level), adjacent to Blue Hill Nature Reserve in the Kouga Mountains, I flushed something – and I knew it was not a Common Quail. The jizz was more buoyant and instead of a rapid flight off into the unpursuable distance, the bird flopped down untidily only 20 metres away. I failed to find it a second time in the 12-year-old fynbos.

Despite the time that had elapsed since the last fire in the area, the vegetation cover was sparse and dominated by restios, with the prevailing *Protea lorifolia* no more than one metre high. This is because the north-east-facing slopes in this region tend to be hotter and drier and so vegetation growth is very slow.

As I returned to my original position, I put up yet another individual. This bird dropped into the undergrowth a mere 10 metres away but, again because of its incredible camouflage and cryptic habits, I couldn't locate it. I walked straight past it while trying to follow up, only to hear it peeping, whereupon I >

ALAN LEE (2)

below *A male buttonquail observed in July at Blue Hill Nature Reserve in the Kouga Mountains.*

opposite *The feet of the female Hottentot Buttonquail are distinctly yellow.*

ALAN LEE (2)

above *The location of the buttonquail encounters on Naartjieskloofberg, illustrating the short, tussocky nature of the vegetation.*

top *The Hottentot Buttonquail in flight lacks the black rump of the Black-rumped Buttonquail.*

turned around and flushed it again. I was now positive that I'd seen a pair of Hottentot Buttonquails.

I eventually abandoned them to continue my survey, despite high winds and low cloud cover. At the end of the five-kilometre hike over Naartjieskloofberg I usually return home via a farm track, but on this occasion that would have meant walking into the face of an icy south-westerly wind. I decided to head back over rocky terrain in the drier shadow of the mountain, retracing my steps. I am so glad that I did.

... I COULD SCARCELY BELIEVE IT WHEN I YET AGAIN FLUSHED A HOTTENTOT BUTTONQUAIL. AND, A METRE FROM MY FEET WHERE THE BIRD HAD TAKEN OFF, ANOTHER INDIVIDUAL SAT FROZEN IN PLACE

On again approaching the location of the sighting, camera at the ready, I could scarcely believe it when I yet again flushed a Hottentot Buttonquail. And, a metre from my feet where the bird had taken off, another individual sat frozen in place.

This time I managed to take another couple of images before I lost track of both birds, despite remaining in the area for a further 10 minutes and intermittently playing what I had recorded on the spot and what I suspect was a contact call. It was a very soft, almost chick-like '*peep peep*'. I also heard a throatier clucking on a couple of occasions, but could not record this (and no, there were definitely no chickens on the hillside). The only other birds present were Orange-breasted Sunbirds, Cape Buntings and a very distant group of Cape Rockjumpers. I also played the Black-rumped Buttonquail hoots, but there was no response.

All in all, it was a very special sighting of one of our most enigmatic species.

ALAN LEE ◆