

Buff-breasted Button-quail

The Buff-breasted Button-quail appears to be a wet season visitor in extremely small numbers to the well-drained lower slopes of the hills on the western edge of the Great Dividing Range (i.e. Mt Carbine, Mt Molloy, Mareeba). Here they attempt to breed if conditions are right. They seem to be absent from these slopes for the rest of the year. In this area, since 1992, genuine sightings have been made between November and April with most having been in January. Only one has been made for November (29th), three for December (14th, 18th & 23rd), 7 for January, 5 for February, 3 for March and 2 for April. When they are present, they inhabit the last 100–200 metres of the gentle, lowest slopes of the hills just before the flats.

All sightings have been from very sparse grass — **NO** sightings have been made from the dense grass cover which Painted Button-quail and Brown Quail often inhabit. Painted Button-quail and Brown Quail which can be very common throughout the area sometimes also inhabit the open, sparse-grassed slightly sloping ground that Buff-breasted prefers. These two species are often present right through the year. Buff-breasted sightings have been as pairs or single birds — it seems to be extremely rare to see more than two together (in 17 years of observation I have never seen more than two at any one time). I don't believe they occur "in small flocks of three to eight birds" as quoted in the literature, at least through the time they are in this area.

The Mareeba—Mt Carbine area seems to be the best area in which to find birds at this time though in some years it seems to be entirely absent. Two birds were banded in the vicinity of Karumba on the SW of Cape York Peninsula some years ago, one in August 1963 and another in May 1965. In addition three single birds were flushed on Dorunda Station in the same part of the peninsula in August 1996 which probably were Buff-breasted. This may mean that the birds wander right across Cape York Peninsula in the non-breeding season and return to the western slopes of the Great Divide to breed. So it is worth being alert for them anywhere across the Peninsula during the dry season.

With good observation, Buff-breasted can usually be distinguished from Painted and Brown Quail. Buff-breasted, especially females appear as a *very large* button-quail — larger than Painted. They sometimes show the *buff breast and under-tail coverts* as they bank when flying away — no other button-quail shows this. The primaries may appear darker than those of Painted and the rump may appear sandy-brown or pale rufous-tinged in certain lights. If a flushed bird looks like another button-quail or quail, then that is what it will be. It won't be Buff-breasted. When sitting, the longish, heavy, slightly drooped bill is obvious (and diagnostic) as is the yellow eye (red in Painted).

Unfortunately, the chances of seeing a Buff-breasted Button-quail are quite small and only a small number of people have been lucky enough to see a genuine Buff-breasted. However, it is always worth trying for a sighting, especially during the wet season.

I would appreciate data on any sightings (genuine sightings only) — please indicate why you identified a bird as Buff-breasted and why it was not one of the other button-quail or quail. (Unfortunately there have been quite a number of sightings of other button-quail and quail misidentified as Buff-breasted).

The best article/paper on this button-quail is by Danny Rogers, "*A Mystery with History*" published in Wingspan for March 1995: pp 26–31.

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