



Quail

Coturnix coturnix

Status

Red listed: HD, SPEC 3 (V)
Schedule 1 of WCA 1981
Annex II/2 of EC Wild Birds Directive

National monitoring

Rare Breeding Birds Panel.

Population and distribution

Quail were common in the UK up to the beginning of the twentieth century but now are relatively scarce. They arrive in waves during the spring and summer, their numbers varying considerably between years (*88–91 Atlas*). Some quails do not reach the UK until the second half of July (these are probably birds born in Africa or southern Europe in April/May of the same year). Their UK distribution varies between years, although their strongholds are in Wiltshire and Dorset and they are absent from upland areas (*88–91 Atlas*). There were an estimated 2,600 calling males in Britain in 1989, but this was an influx year and was particularly well covered by county recorders. Usually, there are records of about 300 calling males in Britain (*88–91 Atlas*).

Ecology

In the UK, quails breed in cereal and hay fields, particularly winter cereals and meadow-like wild grasslands. As with some other game birds, crop structures which allow good movement, provide protection from avian predators and are a source of insect food are most likely to be associated with successful breeding (Potts 1986, Stoate 1989). Many males probably remain unmated in the UK. However, recording singing males is the only practical way of censusing this elusive species, therefore the survey method given below provides an index of numbers present, not an accurate estimate of the number of potential breeding pairs (Moreau 1951). The advertising song of the male is a staccato, far-carrying (but difficult to locate) 'whIC whic-whIC', given usually 3–10 times in close succession (*BWP*).

Breeding season survey – population

Information required

- maximum number of singing males heard on any one of six visits
- a map of the survey site with the boundary clearly marked.

Number and timing of visits

Six visits, roughly a fortnight apart, from mid-May to the end of July.

Time of day

At dusk, between about half an hour before and an hour after sunset.

Weather constraints

Avoid rainy and/or windy conditions (greater than Beaufort force 3).

Time of day, Weather constraints, Sites/areas to visit, Equipment, Safety reminders

As for the population survey (see above).

Disturbance

Should not be a problem using this survey method.

Methods

Mark the survey area on a map. Cover all habitat types equally, except for woodland over five years old which can be excluded. It is extremely difficult to count partridges in root crops, so make a note of areas of root crop within the survey boundary (on estates where keepers do the count, these are often searched using dogs). Cover the area on a field-by-field basis. Walk or slowly drive around field headlands. Stop to scan all fields systematically, count birds in the outside edge of the field first and then criss-cross the field to make sure that you do not miss any coveys. If the count is left until after mid-September, many young will have completed moult and it will not be possible to distinguish them from adults.



Pairs of grey partridge without young, as well as successful pairs, will be seen feeding on stubbles or other patches of open ground. Distinguish males from females and young birds from old; if necessary, use illustrations (see Potts 1986). Ageing should be possible even when young are 9–10 weeks old.

Record any pairs or single birds seen without broods as well as pairs seen with broods. For each covey, record the number of adult males, number of adult females and the number of young. There are often more than two older birds in each covey when young birds are present. Small coveys frequently comprise older birds only.

Plot the position of each covey on the map. For example: gp ♂ ♂ ♀ + 10, corresponds to grey partridge – 2 males, 1 female, 10 young. If you cannot be sure of the number of birds in a covey (eg some run into cover), note this on the map and when quoting the final figures.

Calculate the final figures from the map and report the number of adult males and females and the number of young in each covey, eg as follows:

Covey number	Adult male	Adult female	No. of young
1	1	1	7
2	1	1	4 incomplete
3	1	1	
4	2	1	9

In upland areas, grey partridges are best counted using trained dogs to locate coveys on moorland fringes.

References

- Anon (1996) *The Annual Partridge Count Scheme: August brood count recording form and instructions*. Game Conservancy Trust, Fordingbridge.
- Potts, G R (1986) *The Partridge: pesticides, predation and conservation*. Collins, London.

Sites/areas to visit

Cereal fields and meadow-like grasslands, eg hay fields.

Equipment

- 1:10,000 OS field maps of the survey area, detailed enough to show field boundaries
- compass
- torch
- Schedule 1 licence.

Safety reminders

Areas to be visited at night should first be visited during the day.

Ensure someone knows where you are and when you are due back.

Always seek permission for entry to private land, especially crop fields (avoid walking through the crop), and always warn the police that you propose to drive around and survey at night. Always carry a compass, map and torch.

Disturbance

Avoid disturbing singing birds. Approach only as close as is necessary to pinpoint singing positions to within 100 m. If possible, remain at the field edge or on the path/road.

Methods

Mark the boundaries of the survey area on a map. If you are unfamiliar with the area, visit it by day to plan a route that will take you to within 250 m of all potential quail habitat. Also mark on the map 'listening points', distributed so that you can listen from within 250 m of all potential quail habitat. Even if you know the area well, plan the route carefully in advance. Listen for calling birds for at least five minutes at each 'listening point'. It may be possible to survey most of the area by car from the public road. When surveying by car, make sure you get out of the car and switch off the engine to listen. Map the location of singing males to within 100 m. If you find it difficult to pinpoint a bird with this degree of accuracy, try listening to it from several different points.

References

- Moreau, R E (1951) The British status of the quail and some problems of its biology. *British Birds* 44: 257–276.
- Potts, G R (1986) *The Partridge: pesticides, predation and conservation*. Collins, London.
- Stoate, C (1989) Some observations on habitat and censusing of territorial quail *Coturnix coturnix*. *Hampshire Bird Report*: 77–78.