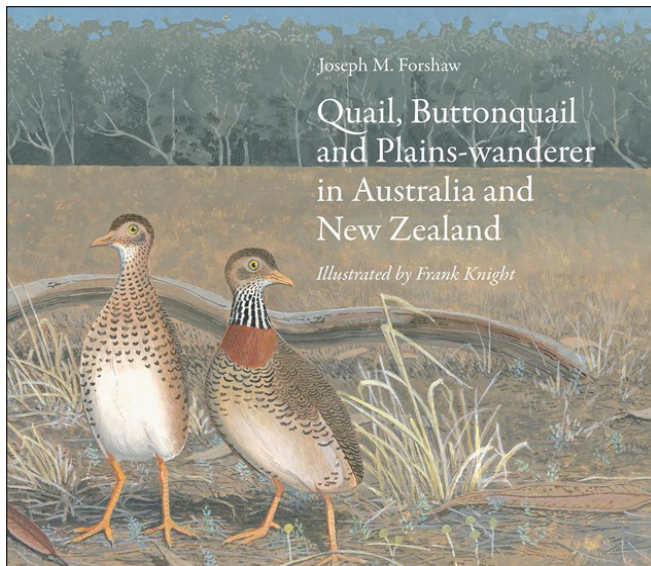


## Book Review

### Quail, Buttonquail and Plains-wanderer in Australia and New Zealand

By Joseph M. Forshaw, illustrated by Frank Knight

CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne. Hardcover, 183 pp. RRP \$170.



As the title alludes, this taxonomically and geographically diverse text covers the native and introduced quail, and button-quail of Australia and New Zealand, and the Plains-wanderer, a species endemic to Australia. These groups are taxonomically distinct from each other, but are often grouped together because of their ecological similarity; all are relatively secretive ground-dwelling species. The quail, button-quail and, to a lesser extent Plains-wanderer, are some of Australia's most cryptic and poorly studied groups of birds, and a comprehensive treatment of them is welcome.

Following an informative foreword by David Baker-Gabb, the text follows a clear format that would be expected for a reference text of this style. A preface gives a broad scope of the layout of the text followed by a brief introductory chapter. The main body of text is devoted to chapters detailing each species. Species accounts follow a format similar to that presented by Marchant & Higgins (1993) in the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds*, with the addition of a section on captive husbandry, which will be of interest to those who keep these species in captivity.

Each species account covers the following topics: description, distribution, habitats and status, movements, calls, diet and feeding, breeding, eggs and aviary notes. Forshaw gives more or less a chronological review of literature within each section with the occasional hint of personal experience. Each account is complemented

by a full-colour plate of the species *in situ* as well as a field-guide style plate of male and female with, when possible, the plumage of the chick and an adult in flight. The distribution maps depicted for each species are appropriate, though for most species not entirely accurate; the cause of this appears to be Forshaw choosing to depict "what I [Forshaw] consider to be the core range" (p. x). In some cases this results in the range being unnecessarily truncated. For example, the Chestnut-backed and Red-backed Button-quail are known to occur throughout the Gulf of Carpentaria, but this is not represented on the range map. Forshaw gives the extinction risk classification for each species, but again appears to have adopted his own system. For example, Forshaw classified Black-breasted Button-quail as Endangered, although under no legislation or other classification system is this species listed as Endangered. It is classified as Vulnerable (IUCN, nationally in Australia, and in Queensland) and Critically Endangered (New South Wales). This is troublesome, as anyone relying on this text for this information could be led into error. In the breeding and eggs section of each account, a photograph of a clutch of eggs is given as well as a tabulated account of most egg specimens in museum collections.

In typical Forshaw fashion, illustrations replace photographs of both the birds and their habitat in this text. In previous publications (e.g. Forshaw & Cooper 2015), this has not prevented the reader from fully appreciating the beauty and detail of both the focal species and its habitat, because of the unsurpassed life-like detail of William T. Cooper's work. Although Frank Knight has produced a beautiful array of plates for this text, as a reader with detailed knowledge of the intricate beauty of the plumage of this group of birds I was left a little dissatisfied. The detail that Knight has demonstrated in previous work was sometimes not apparent here. For example, the illustration of Stubble Quail on page 25 appeared to lack refined detail and, whether or not it was a printing error in the copy that I reviewed, this plate lacked illustrated eyes. The two plates that were most impressive were the Red-chested Button-quail (p. 133) and Plains-wanderer (p. 157). Both are captivating illustrations that give a taste of the intricacy of the birds and are well placed in their environment, although, with an understanding of Plains-wanderer habitat preferences, it is curious that they are illustrated amongst what appears to be *Eucalyptus* leaf litter.

As stated in the preface, this book is intended as a reference text; therefore, it goes without saying that the text should be well researched, factually accurate and have arguments based on sound evidence. For the most part,

the volume succeeds in this aim, and it is apparent that Forshaw has expended much time and effort in scouring the literature for any reference to this group of birds – not an easy task as most references are quite dated. I think this is perhaps the greatest strength of this text; it represents a thorough and coherent literature review, rather than a synthesis of the ecology of these species. Occasionally throughout, Forshaw draws on his own experience with this group of birds in the wild and captivity, though admittedly little new or novel information is presented.

Before this text, the *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds, Volume 2* (Marchant & Higgins 1993) and *Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 3* (Debus 1996) have been the authoritative texts on this group of birds, at least for button-quail. Hall (2013) published a piece on Australian quail with particular reference to ecology and management, though it falls short of the detail provided in Forshaw's work. To my knowledge, only one other previously published reference text has paid particular attention to the button-quail: *Bustards, Hemipodes, and Sandgrouse of Dry Places* (Johnsgard 1991). Forshaw's text appears to be a much more exhaustive review than has previously been performed on this group of birds. Despite this, I would argue that both Debus (1996) and Johnsgard (1991) provided a greater and more refined understanding of the biology of this group of birds, particularly in reference to button-quail.

Despite its undoubted strengths, there are occasions when inaccurate information is included. My experience lies with the button-quail group, so without reviewing the literature on the other species it is hard to assess their accuracy but, regarding the button-quail, a few errors or unusual inclusions were noted. It is unclear what taxonomy system Forshaw adopts; for example, he lumps the New Caledonian Button-quail as a subspecies of the Painted Button-quail, which it may well be, though it is now accepted as a distinct species (BirdLife International 2023). There are numerous inaccuracies in the section on Buff-breasted Button-quail. For example, the type specimen was collected in 1899 not 1894 (Robinson & Laverock 1900). The Buff-breasted Button-quail is represented by 13 verified specimens not eight (Webster *et al.* 2022), and further, McLennan collected six skins and four clutches of eggs not 'five specimens' (McLennan 1922). Although minor inaccuracies such as these do not detract from the

overall value of the book, they are still frustrating, as they should have been easy to detect and correct.

These minor quibbles aside, Joseph Forshaw has presented an impressive review of this group of birds in a coherent and easy-to-follow manner. For this he is to be congratulated. Though I detected inaccuracies in the limited realm that I know intimately, this text can still be considered a very comprehensive literature review. It represents an excellent starting point for anyone looking to learn more about this fascinating group of birds.

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