

Is this a Quail I see before me.....?? (*apologies to W.S.*)

The Common Quail is a rather special bird; our only migrant gamebird and a visitor in high summer more often heard than seen. The distinctive song of the male, evocatively incorporated by Ludwig van Beethoven in his Pastoral Symphony, emerges from cornfields and hay meadows with a somewhat ventriloquial mysticism, once heard, never forgotten.



Common Quail, Old Wives Lees, by Tim Baldwin

It seems clear that numbers arriving vary from year to year, such that “Quail Years” see a sharp upsurge in records in late summer. On one memorable morning in June my BBS survey revealed five males singing in one four hectare field. As birders we tend to record more in June and July, but in the past the peak of records was often in September with birds frequently flushed during partridge shoots.

Records are compromised in part through unfamiliarity, many birdwatchers do not realise that pleasant and partridge poults can fly at a very early age when still quite young and records of “Quail” flushed in late May/early June are often poults mis-identified.



Pheasant poulter, flying at 7 weeks by Dan Scott

The key to “Quail Years” lies in the species extraordinary breeding cycle. Birds winter in the Sahel zone of sub-Saharan Africa, where I was fortunate to catch and ring a good number in Senegal. In spring they move north to breed in the countries bordering then Mediterranean and in favourable years move north again in a ‘leap-frog’ movement to northern Europe where they will often breed again, especially in Britain. Nests are very hard to find, in fifty years of birds-nesting I have only found four, two in France and singles in Surrey and Suffolk.



Common Quail, Senegal 1991 by Norman McCanch

Birds tend to be on their way south by late September and winter records are very rare. Ticehurst recorded three Kent winter records in the nineteenth century, while there have been a few more in more recent years.

However, these winter records need to be treated with caution. Since the 1970's very large numbers of Japanese Quail (*Coturnix japonica*) have been kept in captivity to supply the egg and meat trade and also as pets. These can escape and survive the Kentish winter; the 'Great Storm' of 1987 wrecked one of my aviaries allowing a good number of Japanese Quail to escape. They survived for some months in and around my garden, though some were eventually caught by the farm cats there were a scatter of winter 'Quail' records subsequently, suggesting that I might not have been the only person to suffer losses in East Kent!



Male



Female

Japanese Quail, Mongolia by Y. Muzika

So is it possible to separate these two species in the field? I should say, partly- male songs are completely different and the 'qwic-ic-ic' of Common Quail is diagnostic. Adult males also have very different facial patterns although much of the body plumage is very similar, but females and immatures are much more problematic.



Female japonica

Male japonica

The best features I can suggest for females are **face pattern**, where Japanese females have a whiter ground colour and darker, more contrasting markings which gives them some similarity to young male Common Quail, and **breast pattern**; Common Quail have a pale buff ochre breast band with faint, narrow streaking confined to the upper breast, while female Japanese Quail have a more extensive and deeper yellow ochre breast with prominent dark spotting. Having said all that, domestic Japanese Quail are very variable and include a dark morph which is almost mahogany coloured.

Hybrids between these two species are fertile in the first generation, but subsequent offspring have extremely low fertility (McCarthy, 2006). Even so there are real concerns for the effects of hybridization in southern Europe where the species is widely valued for game shooting.



Quail sketches, by Norman McCanch

For birders in Britain Common Quail will always be a notable bird. Across Europe the species attracts a good deal of attention from enthusiasts though sadly mostly as targets or items on the menu.

This has ever been the case: In "Troilus & Cressida" Shakespeare describes a character thus: " *Here's Agamemnon, an honest fellow enough, and one that loves quails*". In this case, he might have been partial to a quail snack, but in the past organised "Quail fights" were very popular (as they are in Pakistan today) and Shakespeare makes a couple of other Quail references which imply that Quail were prized for fighting, rather than just for eating.

Bibliography

McCarthy, E.M.(2006) *Handbook of Avian Hybrids of the World*, Oxford UP

Harting, J.E. (1871) *The Birds of Shakespeare*, London

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