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The American Wood Quails *Odontophorus*

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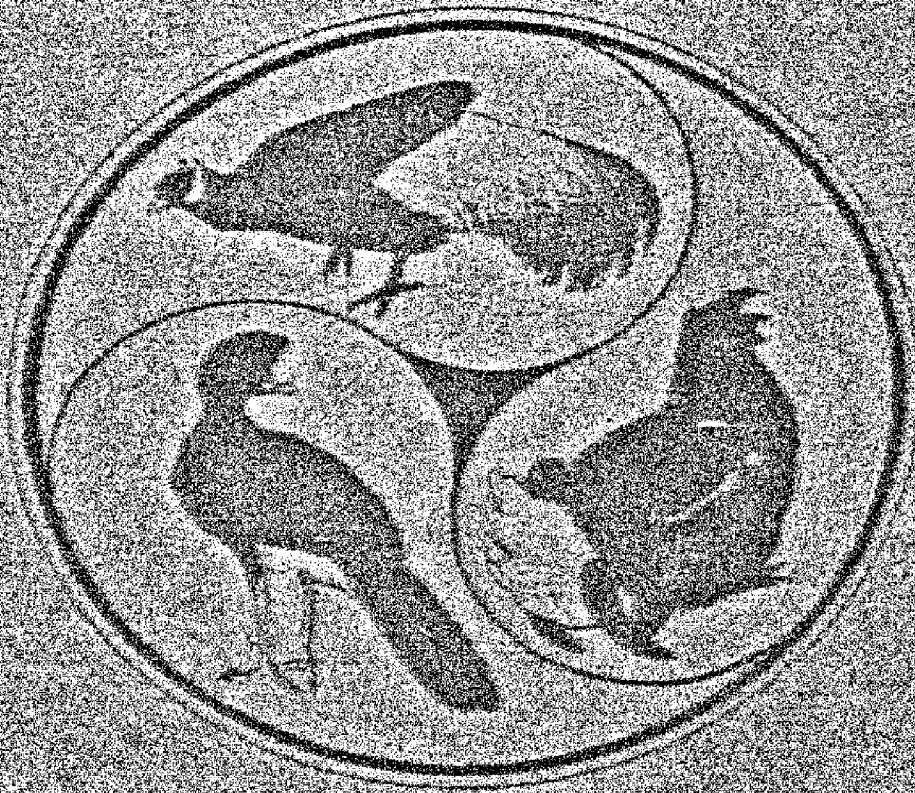


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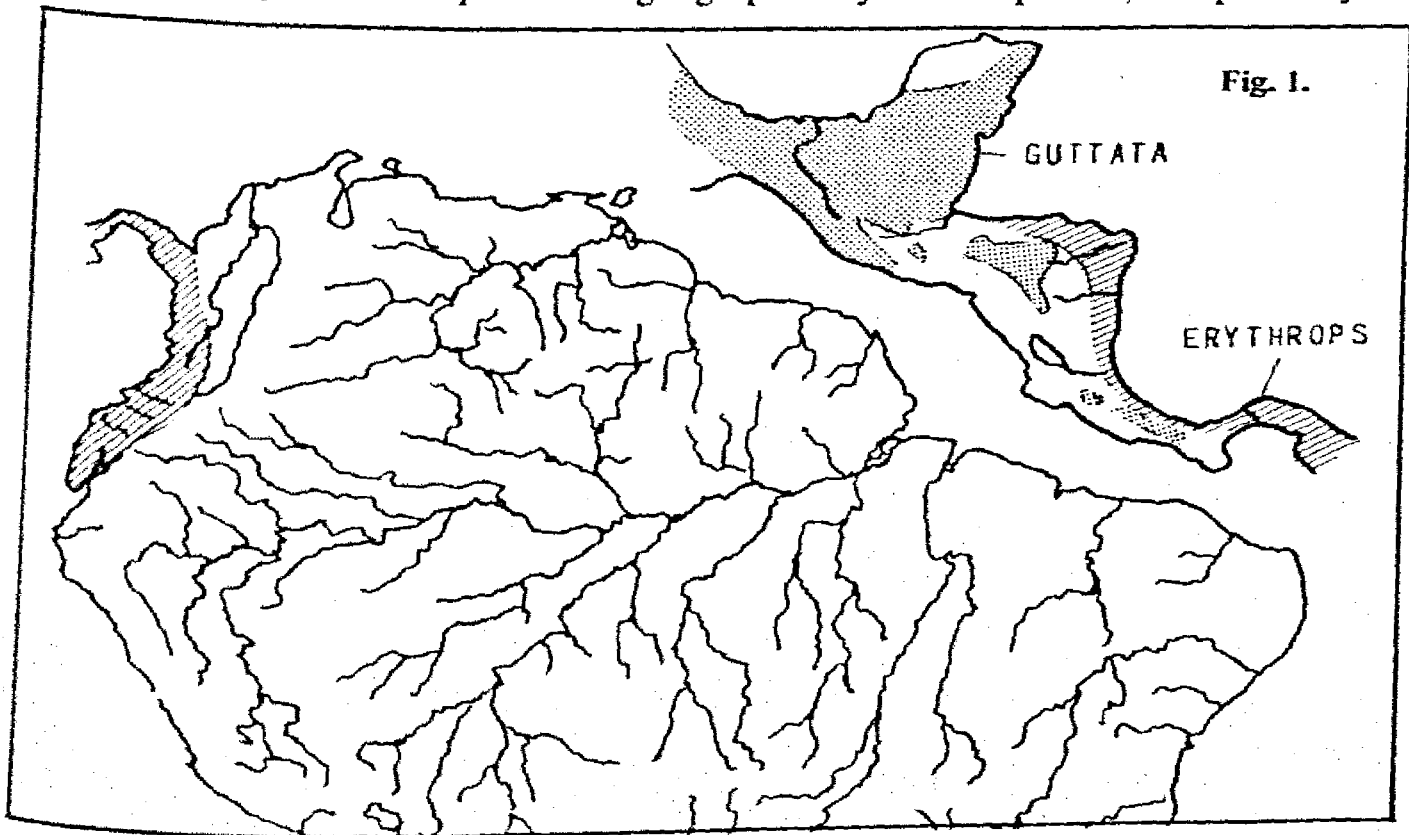
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THE AMERICAN WOOD QUAILS *ODONTOPHORUS*

PAUL A. JOHNSGARD

It is ironic that the genus of New World quails that not only has the greatest collective geographic range (from central Mexico to northeastern Argentina) but also the largest number of species (12 or more, varying with the authority), is one of the least known groups of American gallinaceous birds. This is in large measure the result of the fact that all of the species are forest-adapted, and generally are associated with tropical to sub-tropical communities, where opportunities for easy observation are virtually absent.

Not only is this the largest genus of the subfamily *Odontophorinae*, but also the species tend to consist of fairly large birds. The Spotted Wood Quail averages about 11–12 ounces in adults, and nearly all of the species are very similar to this in their measurements. Indeed, one of the interesting features of the genus is the fact that the species are all remarkably similar in size and proportion, and almost certainly feed on much the same foods. It is therefore not surprising that the species are geographically well dispersed, and probably no



more than two of them are to be found in any single region. In areas where more than one species is present, there seem to be altitudinal differences that reduce inter-species contacts. Thus, from Nicaragua south to Costa Rica the Spotted Wood Quail (*O. guttatus*) may be in contact with the Rufous-fronted Wood Quail (*O. erythrops*), but there the former species occurs in cloud forest, while the latter occupies the tropical zone, where *guttatus* is to be found in Mexico, (Fig. 1). Likewise, in Panama, two species (*O. leucolaemus* and *gujanensis*) co-exist and respectively occupy intermediate elevations and lowland tropical forests. The region supporting the largest number of species is probably Colombia, which supports five species. This area would appear to be in the centre of ancestral distribution of the genus, which in turn occupies a central position in the subfamily *Odontophorinae*.

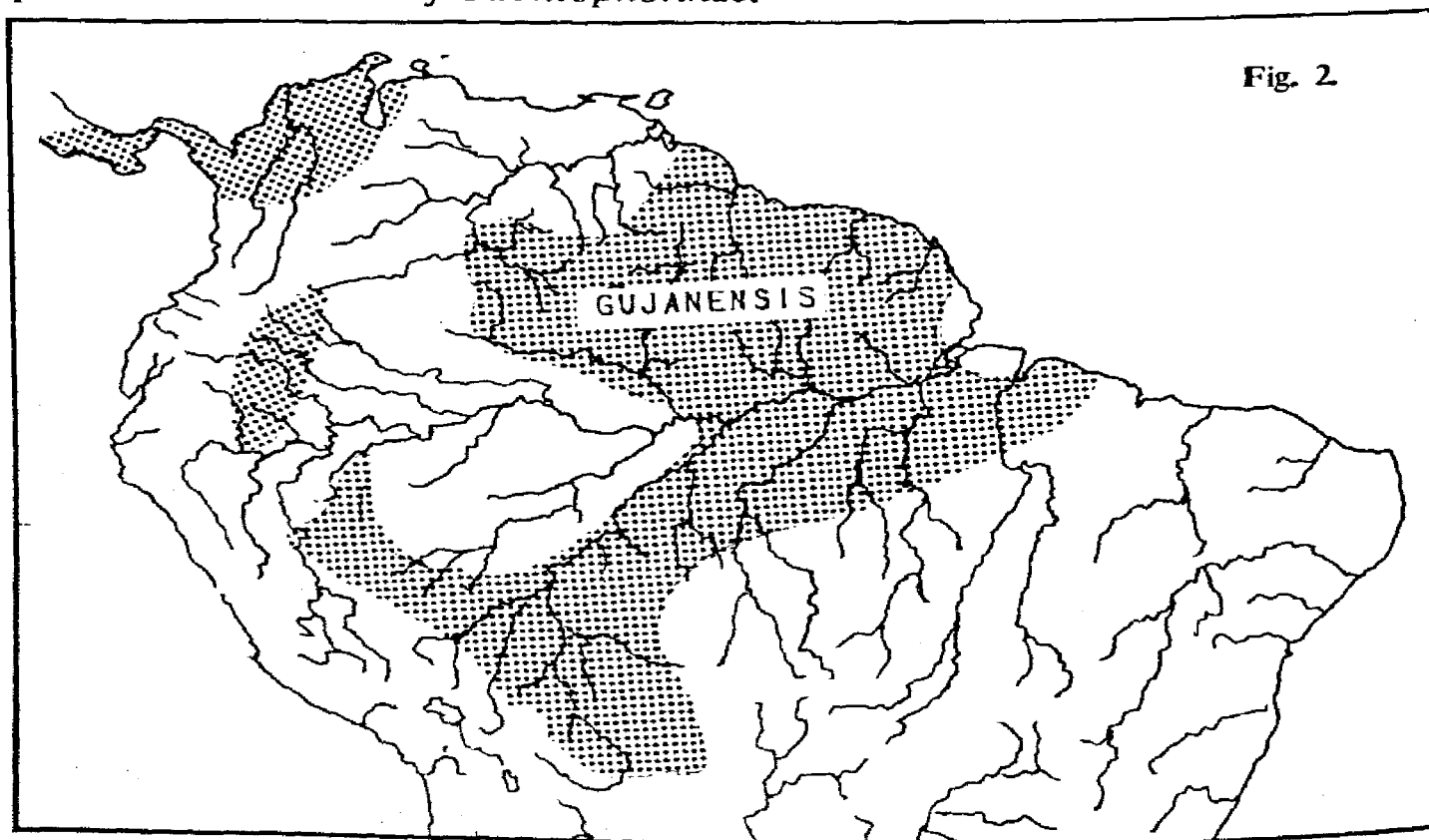
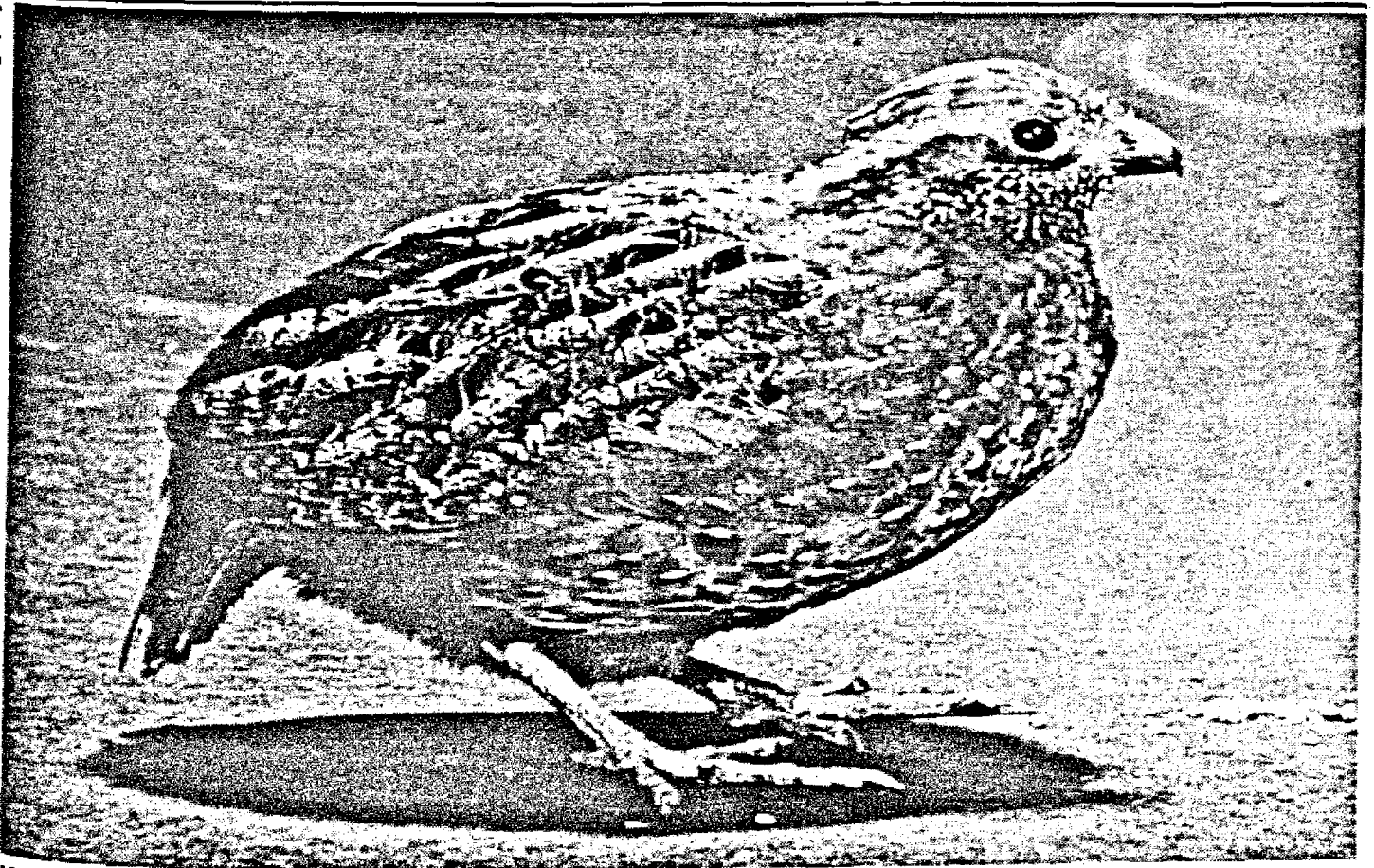


Fig. 2

The species of *Odontophorus* that has the largest overall distribution (and has 8 recognized subspecies) is the Marbled Wood Quail (*O. gujanensis*). It is associated with lowland tropical to subtropical forests throughout its entire range, (Fig. 2). Like the other species, both sexes have loud calls, and apparently this is the means by which pairs remain in contact while visually separated. Frank Chapman once described how an apparent pair of captive Marbled Wood Quails faced each other and sang a song in unison, with one bird singing *corcoro* and the other ending with *vado*, so that the *corcorovado* "song" (and the native name of the species) sounded as if it were coming from a single bird.

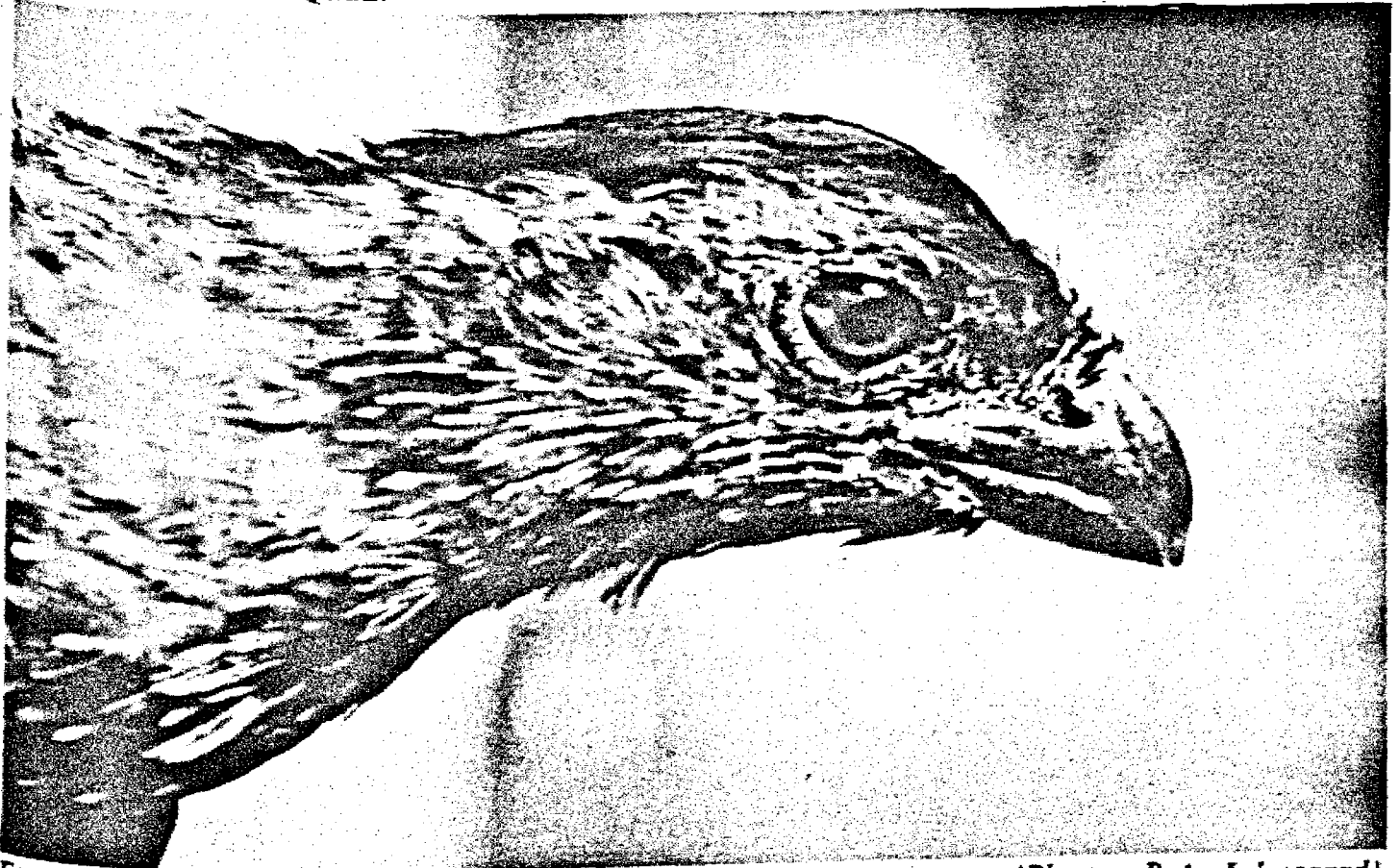
Well to the southeast of the Marbled Wood Quail's range, and separated from it only by lowland forest, is the range (Fig. 3) of the Spot-winged Wood

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Male Spotted Wood Quail.

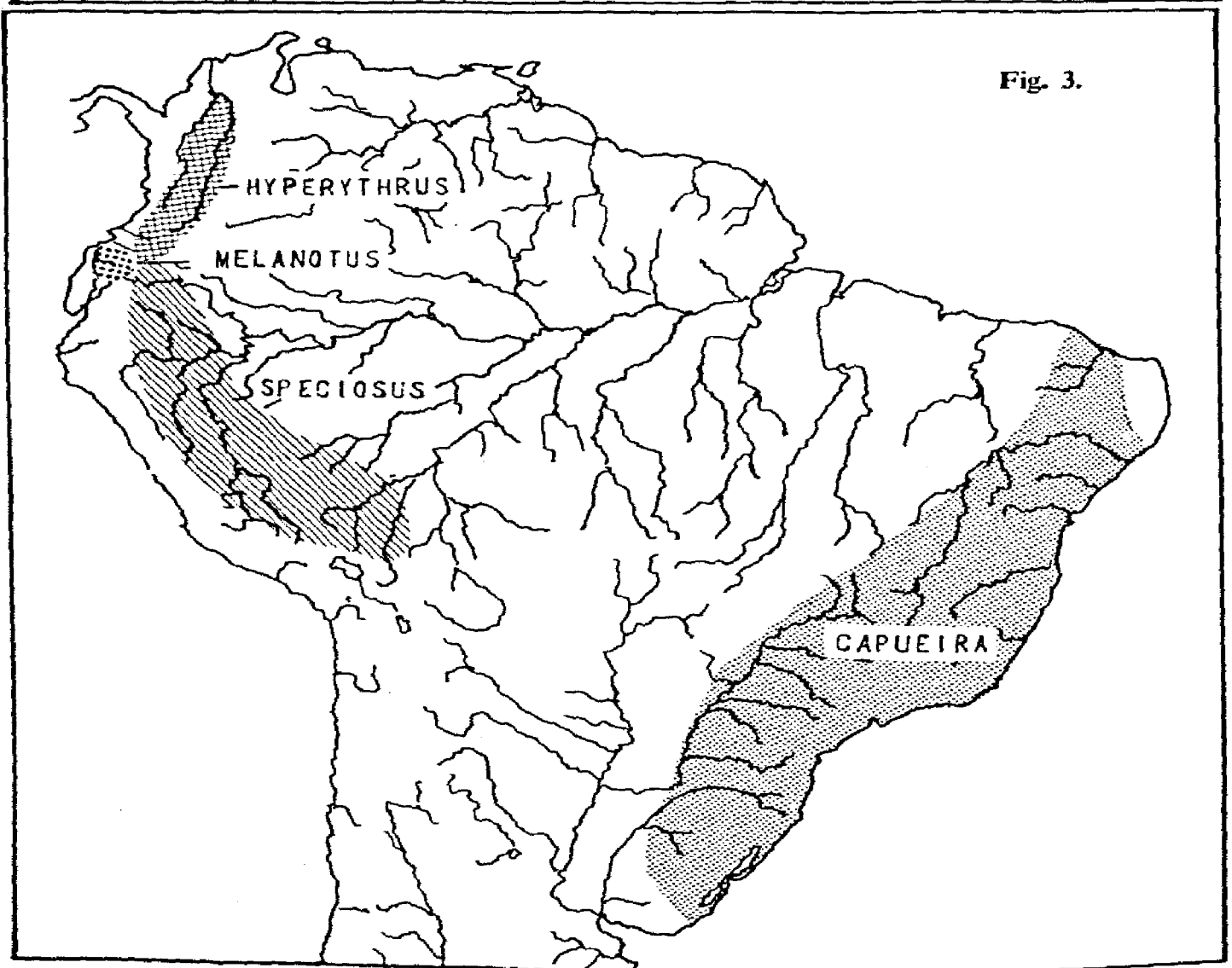
(Photo: National Zoo)



Female Spotted Wood Quail.

(Photo: P.A. Johnsgard)

Fig. 3.



Quail (*O. capueira*). It is also adapted to lowland forest, and is probably fairly closely related to *gujanensis*, the two forms evidently comprising a superspecies.

Collectively speaking, the next largest group of populations is a highly variable series of subspecies or species starting with *erythroptus*, a tropical forest species extending south from Honduras to western Ecuador. Closely paralleling its range in Colombia and Ecuador is the Chestnut Wood Quail (*O. hyperythrus*), a more montane-adapted form found in the subtropical zone. A darker, chestnut-throated form, the Dark-backed Wood Quail (*O. melanotus*), also occurs in Ecuador, and from the same region southward the Rufous-breasted Wood Quail (*O. speciosus*) occurs in lowland forests all the way to northern Bolivia. These four populations all seem to be quite closely related and probably represent replacement forms of the same species or superspecies.

Another group of apparently closely related species extends from Costa Rica Panama eastward to Venezuela, (Fig. 4). Most of these have white throats, although one (*atrifrons*) is an exception. The Black-breasted Wood Quail of

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Costa Rica and western Panama is associated with humid tropical to subtropical forests, and is replaced in eastern Panama by the recently described Tacarcuna Wood Quail (*O. dialeucos*), the most recently discovered species of New World quail. In northern Colombia and adjacent northwestern Venezuela the Black-fronted Wood Quail (*O. atrifrons*) occurs in subtropical forests, and somewhat farther east it is replaced by the similar Venezuelan Wood Quail (*O. columbianus*)



Spotted Wood Quail habitat — Chiápas, Mexico.

(Photo: P.A. Johnsgard)

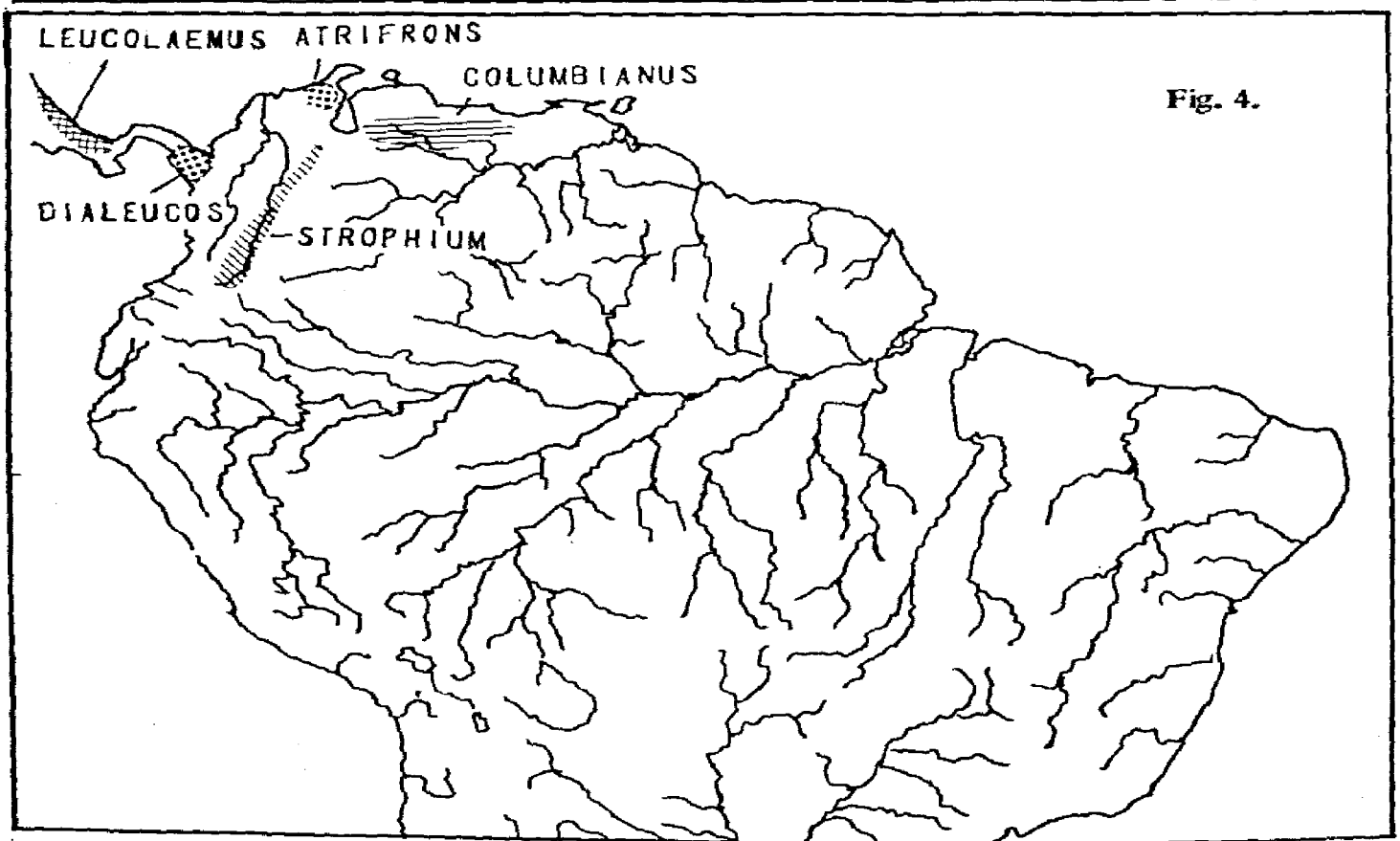


Fig. 4.

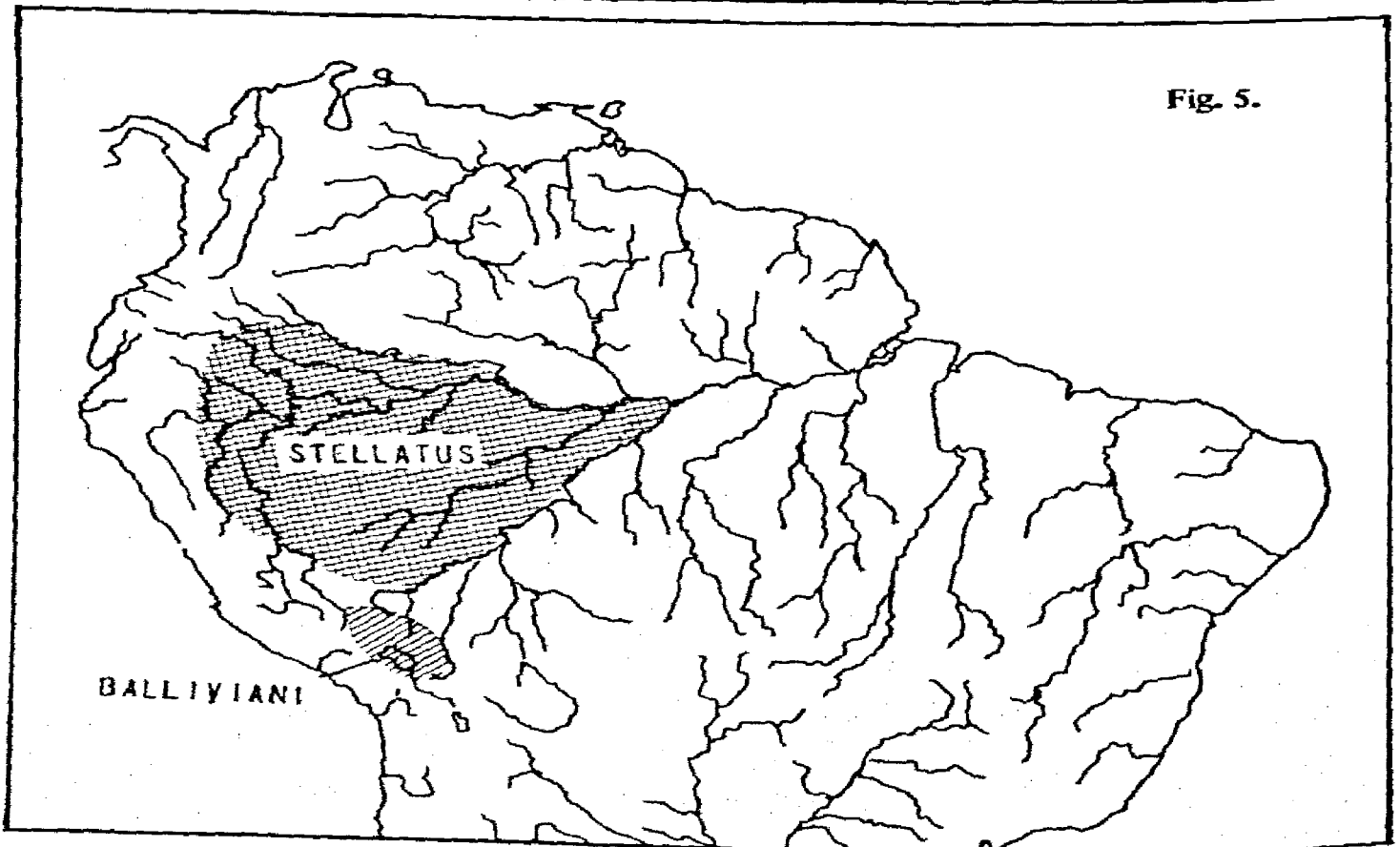


Fig. 5.

which, rather than having a black throat, has a white throat with fine black streaking. Lastly, extending south from northern Colombia in the temperate mountain forests is the Gorgeted Wood Quail (*O. strophium*), which is banded with black and white on the throat and upper breast.

One last pair of close relatives remain to be mentioned. One of those occurs in the upper Amazon basin, where the Starred Wood Quail (*O. stellatus*) replaces the Marbled Wood Quail in the tropical forest areas. The other is the Stripe-faced Wood Quail (*O. balliviani*), which is found in subtropical forests of southeastern Peru and adjacent Bolivia (Fig. 5).

Last of all is the Spotted Wood Quail (*O. guttatus*) of southern Mexico and adjoining Central America. This species does not appear to have any especially close relatives. It is the only one of these species that I have been able to see alive and was able to keep in captivity for some time. In the early 1970's I purchased a female from a peasant in Chiápas, and during the same period a male was present at the National Zoo in Washington. Both of these birds were eventually sent to Frank Strange, a well-known quail breeder in California, where it was hoped that they might mate, but nothing resulted from the effort. Although I had the female in captivity for several weeks, she never sang, and I was told by a Mexican who had a pair that the birds only sang duets. His pair would sing both at dawn and at dusk, and during the day when it was cloudy. The two birds had noticeably different voices, and their collective song usually lasted about two minutes. For a time, when the male was sick, the female refused to sing, indicating the probable importance of song in maintaining pair bonds and keeping the birds in contact. The birds seem to survive fairly well in captivity, and one lived for 12 years in the zoo at Tuxtla Guiterrez, Chiápas. However, I have not heard of any breeding success with members of the genus.*

References

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*The St. Louis Zoological Park successfully hatched and reared three specimens of *Odontophorus capueira* in May 1965. This was no doubt a first breeding for this species. An article describing this event appeared in *Aviculture Magazine*, January-February 1970.