

Cute As A Button Quail

Button quail also have an extensive vocabulary of chirps and coos.

3-1-2004

By Mary K. Wilson

Tiny blurs of color race along the floor of the aviary. Part janitor, part clown, button quail make a lively addition to an aviary. Averaging about 4 inches long, button quail (*Coturnix chinensis*) are the smallest of the quail. Commonly kept in aviaries to clean-up after the more beautiful and fickle finches, button quail prove that they, too, can be interesting and delightful aviary subjects.

On his Web site, zebrafinch.com, Gerrie Landry notes that he purchased a pair of silver button quail, one of the species' many mutations, for \$2.50 in 1971. Prices haven't risen much since then, and pairs of normal or silver birds can still be purchased for less than \$20. This is due in part to the fact that button quail are prolific breeders.

Colors

The normal, "wild-type," button quail looks like a game bird. The hens are various shades of brown, while the males are black, with brighter markings, a white throat and a cheek patch. Birds in various shades of gray are the result of the most common mutation in this species, silver. Button quail also come in cinnamon or fawn. Blue face, red breasted, white and splashed (a form of pied) are also mutations of these birds.

Housing

Button quail thrive when placed in large aviaries. These ground dwellers prefer open spaces so they can run, with plenty of cover in which to hide. Plantings and boxes placed on their sides make excellent hiding places.

Choose the largest cage you can accommodate in your home. The minimum dimensions for the cage should be 20 inches deep and 14 inches wide. Keep button quail in pairs or trios; a single bird will become lonely.

In an aviary, button quail eat seeds dropped by finches or softbills; therefore, the bottom of the cage must be kept clean. These birds do a good job of cleaning up spilled seeds. However, as they do so, they run through their own droppings, which can become encrusted into tiny balls on the ends of their toes. The balls soften with warm water, but it is better to avoid the situation in the first place by using a loose mix of sand and shavings or by changing newspaper daily. The same cleanliness should apply, whether the birds live in a cage or an aviary.

Diet

The omnivorous button quail eat most finch and softbill seed mixes on the market. In addition, they enjoy fresh fruits and vegetables, hard-boiled eggs and bread soaked in juice or water. Insects can be provided as well. Button quail especially enjoy mealworms, though crickets are also a treat.

Button quail also need adequate calcium. Hard-boiled eggs, egg shells, cuttle bone, calcium-enriched grit and oyster shells are readily eaten by these birds and supply the large amounts of calcium they need.

Behavior

The behavior of these tiny, docile birds endears them to breeders and pet owners alike. In an aviary situation, button quail do not pick fights. They happily coexist in aviaries with other species of finches and softbills, as well as live very peacefully on their own. Scuffles may occur only when there is too little space or too few hiding places. Adding places to hide or removing the offender to another aviary usually resolves any problem.

Male button quail "cry" when kept alone. These highly social birds seem to mourn the loss of a mate. Button quail also have an extensive vocabulary of chirps and coos, but they do not call loudly.

Breeding

Like a chicken, the button quail hen can lay an egg every day for her entire adult life. This may be part of the reason why a hen's lifespan averages only 18 to 24 months.

Button quail do not become "broody" like other species. A hen that makes a nest and lays eggs diligently is rare. A button

quail hen lays eggs haphazardly around its home. Toward the end of the egg-laying cycle, the button quail may build a nest by creating a depression in the bedding (which is why sand works well), and then moving the eggs to the depression. However, the button quail I had usually laid eggs wherever the fancy struck. Unless incubated, the eggs will not thrive.

The eggs can be hatched artificially with an incubator set at 99.5 to 99.9 degrees Fahrenheit. Incubation takes approximately 14 days; however, it may be as long as 18 days depending on the temperature of the eggs prior to incubation. At hatching, the baby button quail is the size of a bumble bee and can easily slip between ½-inch mesh. From the incubator, the chicks should be moved to an aquarium or brooder lined with a non-stick surface. A heat lamp can provide heat for the aquarium to a temperature of 85 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit for the first week.

Baby button quail eat the same as their adult counterparts, only in smaller portions. Water dishes should be very shallow or have rocks placed in them to ensure the depth is a ½ inch; otherwise the chicks will drown. Finely ground nestling food or commercial chick mash can be fed at hatching. Most farm supply stores sell chick mash meant for chickens, which works well for button quail. After five days, introduce greens and seeds.

After the first week, the brooder temperature needs to be lowered 5 degrees Fahrenheit each week until the chicks are at 70 degrees Fahrenheit or room temperature. By this time, the chicks are ready to move to their adult home.

Button quail chicks do not require hand-feeding. This adds to their charm, because it means that these birds can be raised easily.

Their many mutations, ease of care and prolific breeding habits make Button quail excellent birds for the beginner and advanced hobbyist.

From her home in Iowa, Mary Wilson runs Finches With Wishes (www.finches.org) and raises parrotlets and zebra finches.