

# Threatened Birds of Asia:

## The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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## LUZON BUTTONQUAIL

Data Deficient

### *Turnix worcesteri*

**DISTRIBUTION** The Luzon Buttonquail (see Remarks 1) is endemic to Luzon in the Philippines, where records have been mainly or entirely derived from bird-catchers taking within-island migrants, so that the true range and indeed habitat of the species remain obscure; the guess by Dickinson *et al.* (1991) that it is a bird of grasslands and is possibly restricted to the highlands (meaning, therefore, the high areas of the Cordillera Central) is highly plausible (but see Remarks 2).

■ **PHILIPPINES** The few sites known are: *Luzon (western)* **Sinipsip**, Buguias, Benguet, 2,270 m, October 1970 (three specimens in DMNH; also duPont 1971); **Santa Fe**, Nueva Vizcaya, October 1986 (female in NCSM); **Dalton Pass**, Nueva Vizcaya, July and August 1966 (three specimens in PNM), and at 1,050 m (on at least six labels), August–November 1969 (24 specimens in AMNH, BMNH, CM, DMNH, USNM and YPM; also Amadon and duPont 1970) and 750–900 m in February 1973 (male in CM); (*central*) **Ipo Dam**, Bulacan, 150 m, December 1969 (male in DMNH); **Parañaque**, Rizal, July 1934 (McGregor and Manuel 1936) although the date is necessarily provisional (Dickinson *et al.* 1991; see Remarks 3), and probably also the source of the type material in August 1902 (McGregor 1904b); **Pangil**, Laguna, January 1984 (three specimens in WFVZ).

**POPULATION** This species is certainly “rare” (Dickinson *et al.* 1991) in the sense of having eluded any direct contact by ornithologists, but as it is one of a family of notoriously cryptic and unobtrusive birds it is certainly possible that somewhere within Luzon it may be found in reasonable numbers.

**ECOLOGY Habitat** Dickinson *et al.* (1991) asserted that this is a bird of grasslands, possibly restricted to the highlands, but they give no reason for deciding on this habitat. It is of course true that most buttonquails are grassland species (Delacour and Mayr 1946), but some are birds of woodland or even rainforest (notably, in the latter case, Black-breasted Buttonquail *Turnix melanogaster*: see Marchant and Higgins 1993) and the slight possibility needs at least to be considered that the Luzon Buttonquail is one of them (see Remarks 2).

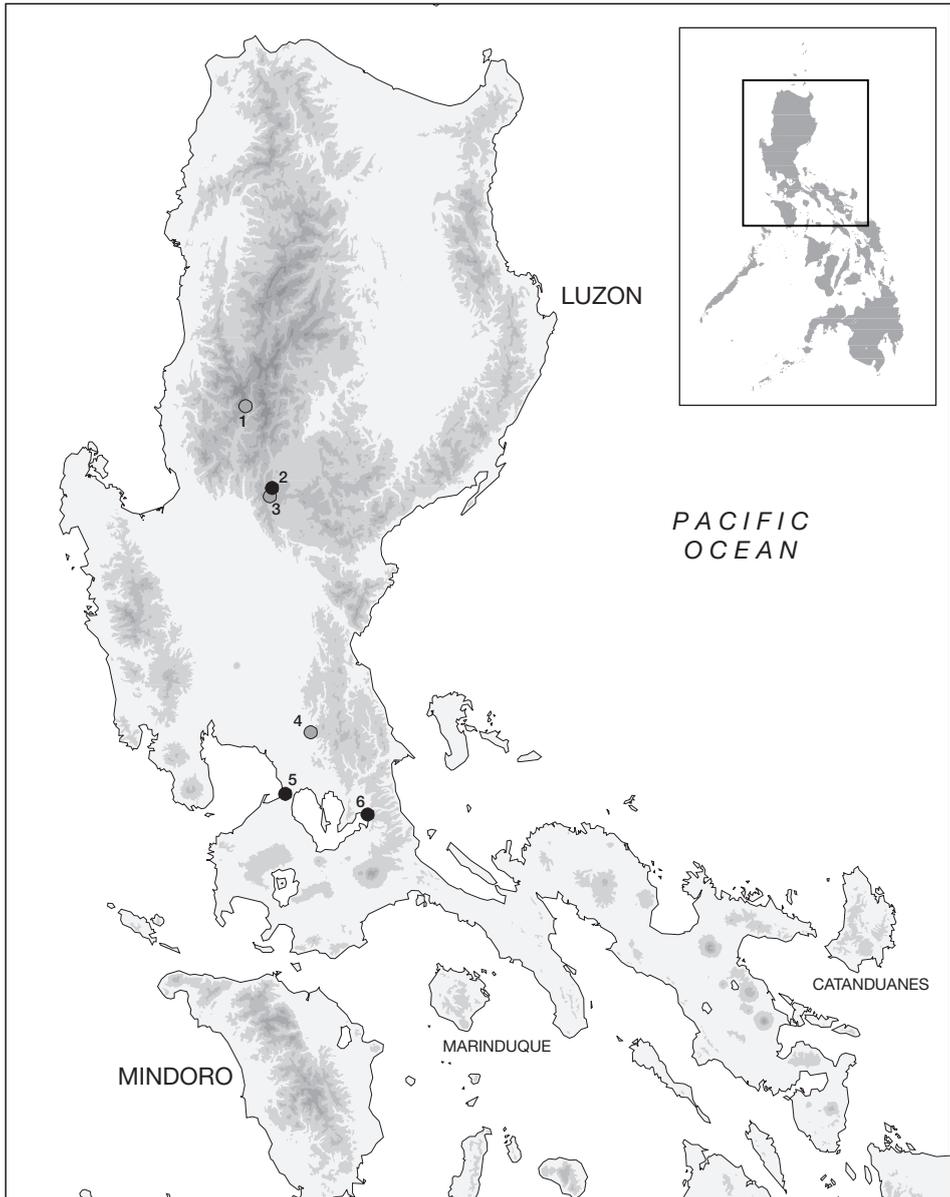
**Food** The label of the 1986 female from Nueva Vizcaya (in NCSM) reads “insects”.

**Breeding** The 1986 female, taken in October, had granular (i.e. inactive) ovaries; the male at Dalton Pass in March 1973 had very slightly enlarged gonads (CM label data); see next subsection.

**Migration** The birds at Dalton Pass were all certainly undertaking some within-island movement, the many in the fall perhaps all travelling south, and, if so, the male in March was presumably moving in the opposite direction. It is moreover possible that all the other birds listed under Distribution were taken as migrants; the type specimen was actually bought in Quinta Market, Manila, in late August 1902 (McGregor 1904b; see Remarks 4), and a live bird was also believed seen in Manila in August 1907 (McGregor 1909–1910). Thus the available evidence is so far consistent with the possibility that the species breeds somewhere in the north of Luzon in April–June and disperses southwards out of the breeding range in the period July–March, although perhaps not all birds are involved in this movement.

**THREATS** None is known with certainty, but bird-catching and hunting might be significant problems. All specimens, and indeed all records, of this species have been the result of bird-catching (see Distribution), and buttonquails have always been a particular target of this practice, with “large numbers” being caught (Manuel 1953). Bird-catchers

(for sale or subsistence) at Dalton Pass, Nueva Vizcaya, are likely to take this species in some numbers (it may safely be assumed that all birds from this site listed under Distribution were purchased from bird-catchers using snares, not mist-nets) but the impact on the population cannot be gauged. Although grassland areas may be increasing in Luzon it cannot



**The distribution of Luzon Buttonquail *Turnix worcesteri*:** (1) Sinipsip; (2) Santa Fe; (3) Dalton Pass; (4) Ipo Dam; (5) Parañaque; (6) Pangil.

● Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present)

be assumed that this is in any way beneficial to this buttonquail, which may prove to have specific ecological requirements not met by the creation of pastures or cropland through forest clearance.

**MEASURES TAKEN** None is known.

**MEASURES PROPOSED** The main priority is to locate viable populations of this species and identify suitable areas in which it might be effectively protected. In addition, migration surveys might yield useful information regarding the size and likely provenance of populations. Although one survey of bird-catching at Dalton Pass (Alonzo-Pasicolan 1992) has recently been conducted, it would be valuable to undertake a more protracted study which looked critically at the species being taken over the period July–March, with a view to monitoring the numbers of individuals of threatened species involved. Ideally, trapping of migrating birds through Dalton Pass should be totally banned and the area policed as a bird sanctuary.

**REMARKS** (1) The taxonomic status of this bird is intriguing, the situation being compounded by the fact that all five specimens known before the 1960s were destroyed in 1945 (Amadon and duPont 1970). In the absence of material, Delacour and Mayr (1945b, 1946) mistakenly judged that the form appeared to be a local race or variant of Common Buttonquail *Turnix sylvatica*, and Rand (1970b), perhaps again without material to hand, formed the same tentative judgement. Amadon and duPont (1970), endorsing the view that *worcesteri* is closely related to Indonesia's Sumba Buttonquail *T. everetti* (also threatened: see relevant account) and Australia's Red-chested Buttonquail *T. pyrrhоторax*, were inclined to regard *everetti* and *worcesteri* as conspecific, but elected to retain specific status for the forms until comparisons of larger series with *pyrrhоторax* could be made (although given the case of *everetti*, represented by only three skins and unlikely to be collected further, such a comparison may possibly never occur). They doubted that two such closely related birds would not be found on other islands to the north of Australia than Sumba and Luzon, and believed that the differences in size and bill structure increased the likelihood that *worcesteri* would occur alongside *sylvatica*.

(2) Clearly the assertion that the Philippines were “once covered with virgin forest” (Dickinson *et al.* 1991) is a little too general, since there is too much endemism in too many birds of grassland and open, non-forest habitat to believe that all of them reached the archipelago after anthropogenic forest clearance had begun (K. C. Parkes *in litt.* 1996). Indeed, it is remarkable that the islands should now harbour four species of buttonquail, all of which are endemic at either the species level (Luzon Buttonquail and Spotted Buttonquail *Turnix ocellata*) or subspecies level (Small Buttonquail *T. sylvatica whiteheadi*, *T. s. celestinoi*, *T. s. suluensis* and *T. s. nigrorum* and Barred Buttonquail *T. suscitator haynaldi*, *T. s. fasciata* and *T. s. nigrescens*). Luzon hosts by far the most, as the two endemic species are actually effectively Luzon endemics (*T. ocellata* has been recorded once from Negros: Dickinson *et al.* 1991). In fact *T. ocellata* exists in two races on Luzon, so the total complement for the island is *T. worcesteri*, *T. ocellata benguetensis*, *T. ocellata ocellata*, *T. sylvatica whiteheadi* and *T. suscitator fasciata*, all of them endemics. It seems inconceivable that five forms of buttonquail should have evolved on Luzon in the absence of original areas of grassland, given that four of them are known grassland dwellers. However, even if some open areas have always existed, which would immediately explain the presence of *T. ocellata*, the notion of two species of *Turnix* evolving in and partitioning a necessarily very small total area of habitat between them (if it is assumed that *T. sylvatica* and *T. suscitator* were later arrivals) remains difficult to grasp. For this reason it is at least worth entertaining the notion that *T. worcesteri* is a forest bird, although this possibility is greatly reduced by its taxonomic proximity to *T. everetti* (see Remarks 1 above, and Ecology under the relevant account).

(3) The wording in Dickinson *et al.* (1991) is slightly ambiguous: it is here taken to mean that they have reservations over the date of the Parañaque skin, but Poulsen (1995) interpreted it as implying doubt over the entire record.

(4) McGregor (1909–1910) indicated that, at the time of his writing, the species was known by four specimens from Quinta Market. However, his original description (McGregor 1904b) declared that “this bird is known to us from the type specimen purchased in the market where it was found with others of the same genus”, so the other three specimens must have been obtained on later visits to Quinta. A misinterpretation of McGregor (1909–1910) might otherwise be that the four were found together and therefore were part of and evidence for an irruptive invasion.