Threatened Birds of Asia:
The BirdLife International Red Data Book

Editors

N. J. COLLAR (Editor-in-chief),
A. V. ANDREEV, S. CHAN, M. J. CROSBY, S. SUBRAMANYA and J. A. TOBIAS

Maps by

RUDYANTO and M. J. CROSBY

Principal compilers and data contributors

■ ***BANGLADESH*** P. Thompson ■ ***BHUTAN*** R. Pradhan; C. Inskipp, T. Inskipp ■ ***CAMBODIA*** Sun Hean; C. M. Poole ■ ***CHINA*** ■ *MAINLAND CHINA* Zheng Guangmei; Ding Changqing, Gao Wei, Gao Yuren, Li Fulai, Liu Naifa, Ma Zhijun, the late Tan Yaokuang, Wang Qishan, Xu Weishu, Yang Lan, Yu Zhiwei, Zhang Zhengwang. ■ *HONG KONG* Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (BirdLife Affiliate); H. F. Cheung; F. N. Y. Lock, C. K. W. Ma, Y. T. Yu. ■ *TAIWAN* Wild Bird Federation of Taiwan (BirdLife Partner); L. Liu Severinghaus; Chang Chin-lung, Chiang Ming-liang, Fang Woei-horng, Ho Yi-hsian, Hwang Kwang-yin, Lin Wei-yuan, Lin Wen-horn, Lo Hung-ren, Sha Chian-chung, Yau Cheng-teh. ■ ***INDIA*** Bombay Natural History Society (BirdLife Partner Designate) and Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History; L. Vijayan and V. S. Vijayan; S. Balachandran, R. Bhargava, P. C. Bhattacharjee, S. Bhupathy, A. Chaudhury, P. Gole, S. A. Hussain, R. Kaul, U. Lachungpa, R. Naroji, S. Pandey, A. Pittie, V. Prakash, A. Rahmani, P. Saikia, R. Sankaran, P. Singh, R. Sugathan, Zafar-ul Islam ■ ***INDONESIA*** BirdLife International Indonesia Country Programme; Ria Saryanthi; D. Agista, S. van Balen, Y. Cahyadin, R. F. A. Grimmett, F. R. Lambert, M. Poulsen, Rudyanto, I. Setiawan, C. Trainor ■ ***JAPAN*** Wild Bird Society of Japan (BirdLife Partner); Y. Fujimaki; Y. Kanai, H. Morioka, K. Ono, H. Uchida, M. Ueta, N. Yanagisawa ■ ***KOREA*** ■ *NORTH KOREA* Pak U-il; Chong Jong-ryol, Rim Chu-yon. ■ *SOUTH KOREA* Lee Woo-shin; Han Sang-hoon, Kim Jin-han, Lee Ki-sup, Park Jin-young ■ ***LAOS*** K. Khounboline; W. J. Duckworth ■ ***MALAYSIA*** Malaysian Nature Society (BirdLife Partner); K. Kumar; G. Noramly, M. J. Kohler ■ ***MONGOLIA*** D. Batdelger; A. Bräunlich, N. Tseveenmyadag ■ ***MYANMAR*** Khin Ma Ma Thwin ■ ***NEPAL*** Bird Conservation Nepal (BirdLife Affiliate); H. S. Baral; C. Inskipp, T. P. Inskipp ■ ***PAKISTAN*** Ornithological Society of Pakistan (BirdLife Affiliate) ■ ***PHILIPPINES*** Haribon Foundation for Conservation of Natural Resources (BirdLife Partner); N. A. D. Mallari, B. R. Tabaranza, Jr. ■ ***RUSSIA*** Russian Bird Conservation Union (BirdLife Partner Designate); A. V. Andreev; A. G. Degtyarev, V. G. Degtyarev, V. A. Dugintsov, N. N. Gerasimov, Yu. N. Gerasimov, N. I. Germogenov, O. A. Goroshko, A. V. Kondrat'ev, Yu. V. Labutin, N. M. Litvinenko, Yu. N. Nazarov, V. A. Nechaev, V. I. Perfil'ev, R. V. Ryabtsev, Yu. V. Shibaev, S. G. Surmach, E. E. Tkachenko, O. P. Val'chuk, B. A. Voronov. ■ ***SINGAPORE*** The Nature Society (Singapore) (BirdLife Partner); Lim Kim Seng ■ ***SRI LANKA*** Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka (BirdLife Affiliate); S. Kotagama; S. Aryaprema, S. Corea, J. P. G. Jones, U. Fernando, R. Perera, M. Siriwardhane, K. Weerakoon ■ ***THAILAND*** Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BirdLife Partner); U. Treesucon; R. Jugmongkol, V. Kongthong, P. Poonswad, P. D. Round, S. Supparatvikorn ■ ***VIETNAM*** BirdLife International Vietnam Country Programme; Nguyen Cu; J. C. Eames, A. W. Tordoff, Le Trong Trai, Nguyen Duc Tu.

With contributions from: S. H. M. Butchart, D. S. Butler (maps), P. Davidson, J. C. Lowen, G. C. L. Dutson, N. B. Peet, T. Vetta (maps), J. M. Villasper (maps), M. G. Wilson

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Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA, United Kingdom
Tel: +44 1223 277318 Fax: +44 1223 277200 Email: birdlife@birdlife.org.uk
Internet: www.birdlife.net

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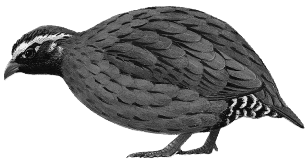
HIMALAYAN QUAIL
Ophrysia superciliosa

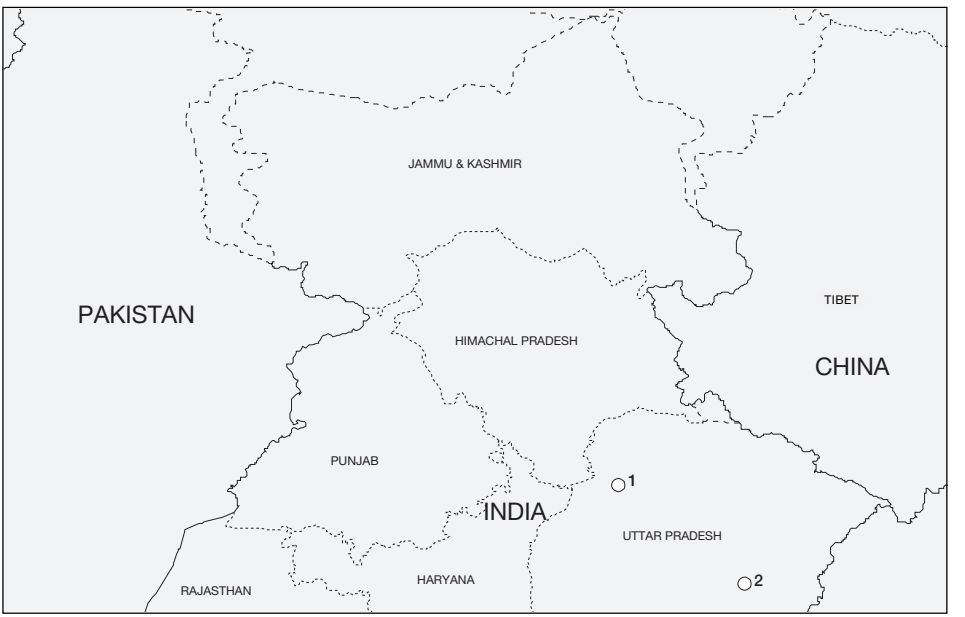


Critical ■ D1
Endangered □ —
Vulnerable □ —

The threat status of this enigmatic quail is extremely difficult to judge given the paucity of information. If not extinct, its population is likely to be tiny, and inference therefore points to its classification as Critical.

DISTRIBUTION The Himalayan Quail—a distinctive small gamebird occupying a monotypic genus—is known only from two areas in the lower Western Himalayan ranges in Uttar Pradesh, India. These lie between 1,650 and 2,100 m and are separated by a distance of c.180 km, although the range of the species is likely to have been much broader (see Remarks 1). Its current distribution is unknown. Between 1945 and 1950 there were apparently reliable reports of the species being shot in east Kumaon near Lohagat village and from the Dailekh district of Nepal (Ripley 1952), and there is another putative sighting near Suwakholi in the Mussoorie hills where Negi (1992) reported encountering coveys of birds on two occasions in September 1984. However, the descriptions of these birds are very vague and all twentieth-century records remains unsubstantiated (see Remarks 2). Records are from:

■ ***INDIA*** ■ ***Uttar Pradesh*** **Mussoorie** (type locality), 1836 (male and female in MCML; also Fisher 1981), 5 km to the north-west, between Badraj and Banog, 1,850 m (erroneously given as 2,100 m by Negi 1992), two males shot out of a covey of 8–10 individuals, November 1865 (Blyth 1867, Hume and Marshall 1879–1881, two specimens in BMNH; see Remarks 2), and



The distribution of Himalayan Quail *Ophrysia superciliosa*: (1) Mussoorie; (2) Naini Tal.
○ Historical (pre-1950)

at Jerepani (Jerripanie, Jharipani), 5 km to the south, c.1,650 m, 1867–1868 (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881), a covey of c.12, November 1869 (two specimens in BMNH), December 1869 (immature in AMNH), June 1870 (young male in BMNH, also Hume and Marshall 1879–1881; see Remarks 3); eastern slopes of Sherkadanda, **Naini Tal**, 2,100 m, two in December 1876 (female in BMNH), the last confirmed record.

POPULATION Only about a dozen specimens are known (Rieger and Walzthöny 1990), all collected between 1836 and 1876, from at least 4–5 coveys each with up to 8–12 birds (see above, also Hume and Marshall 1879–1881). The observation of T. Hutton that 2–3 coveys stayed around Jerapani between November 1867 and June 1868 (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881) indicates that the birds may have been relatively common at that time. In addition they were apparently heard frequently in the neighbourhood of Mussoorie (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881). The apparent rarity of the species by the twentieth century (Comber 1905) indicates a steep population decline in these areas.

Several searches for the species (see Ali 1977a, Rieger and Walzthöny 1990, Sankaran 1990) have failed. The lack of records for well over a century, despite these initiatives, suggests that the species is probably now extremely rare (conceivably even extinct, although this seems improbable). It is appropriate to continue to assume that one or more very small populations still survive in some remote area in the lower or middle Himalayan range.

ECOLOGY ***Habitat*** All records of the Himalayan Quail fall between 1,650 and 2,400 m. It was found in patches of tall grass ("high jungle grass", "tall seed-grass") and brushwood on steep hillsides, particularly the crests of south-facing slopes (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881, Talwar 1995; see Remarks 4). Kaul (1992) suggested that its habitat preference is similar to that of Cheer Pheasant *Catreus wallichi*, although there is no evidence that it frequented the precipitous rocky cliffs often favoured by this species (see relevant account). It has also been suggested that it is a lowland species forced upslope into suboptimal habitats owing to the human population spreading from the plains into the lower hills, causing changes in land-use patterns; the population might even have been pushed to higher elevations by habitat changes at lower elevations post-Pleistocene glaciation (Rieger and Walzthöny 1990). The absence of sightings outside the non-breeding period, coupled with the fact that birds probably did not migrate far, suggests that they may have occupied a different habitat in the breeding season (WWF 1998). Another theory is that post-Pleistocene rises in temperature gradually shifted vegetation belts to higher altitudes and the Himalayan Quail followed, but as its preferred habitat eventually formed islands at the summits of the lower Himalayas and then died out altogether (this range has few peaks above 2,000 m), the species was forced out of existence (Rieger and Walzthöny 1990).

A. O. Hume (*Stray Feathers* 9 [1880]: 467–471) suggested that its habits were like those of the "not very dissimilar" Manipur Bush-quail *Perdicula manipurensis* (see relevant account), especially in being seen very rarely, except at dawn or dusk, keeping to practically impenetrable tall grassland, relying on legs rather than wings for escape and never flying except when very closely approached. It only took flight when almost stepped on, flying heavily for a short distance before pitching into the grass again (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881). Coveys of 6–10 appeared to be the norm, although pairs were sometimes encountered (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881). This information largely derives from museum data: specimens have been taken from coveys of 5–6, 8–10, "about a dozen" and a pair. A comparative study of its structure and morphology appears to confirm that the species was mainly adapted to walking rather than running or flying (Rieger and Walzthöny 1990), as earlier surmised by Ripley (1952) and Mukherjee (1966). Its preference for steep slopes and open habitats is perhaps linked to predator evasion, as it imposes the least obstruction to their weak escape flights (Rieger and Walzthöny 1990). Its contact call was apparently commonly heard in November and appears

to have aided hunters to locate them (Ali 1977a). The individual collected in June was moulting (Knox and Walters 1994).

Food Its food appears to have comprised mainly grass seeds and probably also insects, especially when young, and berries (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Rieger and Walzthöny 1990). Areas of potentially suitable habitat around Suwakholi contain berry-bearing shrubs such as *Principea utilis*, *Lonicera angustifolia*, *Berberis asiatica* and *Gerardiana heterophylla*, all of which are speculated to have provided food for the species (Negi 1992).

Breeding No information is available on breeding habits. There are two undated juvenile specimens that were possibly taken around November.

Migration The species was detected around Mussourie and Naini Tal only when these hill stations were deserted in the winter months, prompting Hume and Marshall (1879–1881) to suspect that "it will prove to be a migrant", perhaps breeding at higher altitudes or in Tibet. They further postulated that the species might have only been present in the Indian Himalayas during particularly cold weather. Ogilvie-Grant (1896e) and Blanford (1895–1898) adopted this theory and stated that the species is either an occasional visitor to the Indian Himalayas or a winter migrant from Tibet. However, morphological and behavioural data suggest that it is not adapted to long-distance dispersal: certainly its short wings (in comparison with the migratory Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*) and weak flight when flushed strongly indicate a sedentary species (Mukherjee 1966, Rieger and Walzthöny 1990). Whether, however, it is appropriate to consider even short-distance movements improbable, as does Talwar (1995), is another matter, since presumably the species could undertake gliding/walking elevational migrations in response to temperature.

THREATS The Himalayan Quail is one of four threatened members of the suite of 11 bird species that are entirely restricted to the "Western Himalayas Endemic Bird Area", threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). Increased human population both around Mussoorie (c.20,000 people in 1987: Crowther *et al.* 1987) and Naini Tal (c.28,000 people in 1987: Crowther *et al.* 1987) appears to have severely degraded habitat in these areas. Negi (1992) postulated that "at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly after independence, indiscriminate cutting of forests, frequent fires, excessive grazing, unplanned road and building construction and above all open cast mining for limestone brought near disaster to hitherto serene environment of Mussoorie Hills". These factors are thought to have eliminated suitable habitat in the region and possibly forced the Himalayan Quail to extinction. It seems likely that cultivation of hill slopes has been detrimental to the species: Rieger and Walzthöny (1990) surveyed between Mussoorie and Naini Tal and discovered "man-made terrace fields up to the top of practically every mountain". Threats listed for Dehra Dun district as a whole are given as grass-cutting, summer fires, invasive weed growth (including *Lantana camara*), poaching of gamebirds, and landslips caused by mining; this latter problem has occurred around Mussourie and has left many slopes completely barren (Singh 2000). Given the species's presumed low dispersal ability owing to its morphological limitations (see Migration above), the land-use changes in and around its former habitats may have caused the local extinction of subpopulations (Sankaran 1990).

Although several intensive or abortive attempts have been made to rediscover the Himalayan Quail by different parties (e.g. BNHS, WWF-India, independent observers), there is a degree of competition to locate the species first. This has apparently resulted in misinformation and lack of cooperation (Rieger and Walzthöny 1990), factors that are clearly not in the best interests of the species itself.

MEASURES TAKEN The Himalayan Quail has been considered something of a mystery for many years. Comber (1905) published a short account of the species which began as

follows: "judging by the enormous number of sportsmen in India who indulge in small game shooting, it is very extraordinary that one of our recognised game-birds should have been entirely lost sight of for thirty years or so". He took the opportunity to stimulate enthusiasm for a concerted search for the species, a rallying call that was repeated by Ali (1977a), Negi (1992) and several more recent authors. Despite these calls for action and the resultant surveys, however, the species remains as enigmatic as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. Around 1980, S. Ali surveyed the most suitable areas around Mussourie, but had limited time and only one dog to flush his quarry (Negi 1992). His proposals to mount an expanded search for the species in 1984 never came to fruition, perhaps as a result of his failing health (Negi 1992). Other searches by WWF-India and independent observers in the Mussoorie and Naini Tal areas have also drawn a blank. Nevertheless, WWF-India, in collaboration with WPA, launched a recent rediscovery programme for this species (WWF 1998). Neither of the historical sites for this species receives any protection (McGowan *et al*. 1999).

MEASURES PROPOSED Considering that small population(s) of the species may exist in some remote area, a well-planned survey of apparently suitable habitat (including a revisiting of the sites from which the species is known) needs to be instituted in the lower Himalayan ranges through the use of remote sensing methods and satellite data. Once potential areas are located, ground surveys need to be organised by a team of competent ornithologists. In an effort to locate the birds, several suitable survey techniques should be adopted. Several flushing (e.g. trained dogs) and trapping techniques (e.g. grain-baited photo-trap stations) over a few seasons should be employed in selected localities. A systematic programme of questioning of local shikaris, using recent illustrations, is also needed, and a poster-plea should be made throughout the prospective range of the species in Uttar Pradesh. If the species indeed shares habitat with the Cheer Pheasant (Kaul 1992), surveys should perhaps be targeted at localities for the pheasant nearest to the known localities for the quail.

REMARKS (1) As Kaul (1992) and Talwar (1995) suggested, it is difficult to accept that only two isolated populations existed around Mussoorie and Naini Tal in the nineteenth century (Hume and Marshall 1879–1881). At that time, similar habitat probably extended far beyond these areas (Rieger and Walzthöny 1992). Ripley (1952) mentioned a local Nepali name from the Dailekh district of Tibet, "*sano kala titra*", meaning small black partridge. If this name is correctly attributed, its range might extend well beyond accepted limits. It is quite probable that it once had a much wider distribution but was reported only from the two Indian areas as they were popular with colonial British sportsmen for whom bird shooting was a frequent pastime (Talwar 1995). Hunting apparently commenced in 1827 around Mussoorie (Anon 1989b), and in 1839 around Naini Tal (Anon 1989a, Kaul 1992). It is quite possible that the species was shot at other hill stations (e.g. Mukteshwar, Ranikhet, Lansdowne, Almora and Abbot Mount) where British sportsmen were also active during the last century (Talwar 1995). (2) The most surprising of these claims is that by Savage (1988), who mentioned that Salim Ali flushed "three juveniles or females" which were "unquestionably of this species" at the type locality (presumably around 1980) but had wished the news to be kept secret until specimens had been obtained. There is no further discussion of this record in recent literature, and when BNHS was contacted to confirm it, J. C. Daniel (*in litt*. 1989) stated that the late Salim Ali "had no knowledge of occurrence of the mountain quail" and that "there is no substance to the statement that he had rediscovered the quail". (3) There seems to be some discrepancy concerning the dates in which the Jerapani birds were collected. Hume and Marshall (1879–1881) wrote of shooting dates in 1869 and 1870, then later quoted T. Hutton in reference to the 1867 and 1868 seasons (Rieger and Walzthöny 1990). The BMNH specimens marked 1869 and 1870 might have been taken two years previously and sent to the Hume collection in 1870. Another specimen is given as shot in 1889 by Shafiq *et*

al. (2000), an error apparently based on the BMNH catalogue registration number (see Knox and Walters 1994). While the exact year of collection might prove impossible to clarify, this fact bears little relevance to the conservation of the species, and the month of collection is in any case more interesting. (4) Carwithen in Hume and Marshall (1879–1881) stated "eastern slopes".