COTURNIX COMMUNIS.

J. Gould & H. Chalon, del. et. lith.

Water, Imp.

COTURNIX COMMUNIS.

Common Quail.

Tetrao coturnix, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 74.

Perdix coturnix, Lath. Ind. Orn., tom. ii. p. 651.

Coturnix communis, Bonn. Ency. Méth. Orn., part i. p. 217.

—— *dactylisonans*, Meyer, Vög. Liev- u. Esthl., p. 197.

—— *vulgaris*, Flem. Hist. of Brit. Anim., p. 45.

—— *major, media et minor*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., pp. 527, 528, 529, tab. 26. fig. 4.

Ortygion coturnix, Keys. et Blas. Wirbelth. Eur., p. 66.

HISTORICALLY speaking the Quail is one of the very oldest known of migratory birds, and is especially interesting from more than one point of view. It fed the Israelites of old, as it now does the epicures of London and Paris, was better known to Moses than to those who now regard it as a choice luxury for the table, and its arrival was looked forward to with as much interest in the East nearly 4000 years ago as it is at the present moment in Sicily, Italy, and elsewhere. It migrates from south to north in April, and takes the reverse course in August and September, crossing the Mediterranean and the Black Sea as regularly as a planet pursues its course.

So much has been written on the history of the Quail and the extent of its range over the globe, that little or nothing new remains to be said on the subject. Its range is vast indeed; for it not only inhabits the whole of Europe, but the greater part of India, Russia, and, perhaps, China and Japan.

In Britain it is far less regular in its appearance than on the neighbouring continent, being plentiful in some seasons and at others but sparingly dispersed; thus at one period the corn-fields and stony elevations almost ring with their "*whit, whit*," while at others the stillness of evening is scarcely disturbed by their well-known notes. Of the three kingdoms, Ireland is the one most frequented by the Quail, the next England, and lastly Scotland. The bird does not appear to evince a preference for any particular counties, and it is just as likely that a pair or pairs may be found breeding in Cornwall as in the northern or any of the intervening English counties: it is the same in Scotland, for it may just as probably be met with on the Grampians as in the Lowlands; and it has been known to breed in the Outer Hebrides. In whatever locality it affects it is only to be found in summer; if an example be seen at the opposite season the circumstance must be regarded as an unusual one: not so, however, in Ireland, for there many, whose migratory instinct would seem to be in abeyance, remain during the winter, unless shot during frosts and sent over with Snipes and Plovers for sale to the London markets, where I have frequently seen examples at this period of the year; and on inquiring what part of Ireland they were from have been told Tralee, a portion of the country spoken of by Thompson as one in which Quails are most abundant. If a correct statistic account could be obtained of the numbers shot in the British Islands, and of the numbers brought to our markets alive from Egypt, Italy, and other southern and eastern countries, I imagine we should be truly astonished. Latham stated, nearly forty years ago, that the Quails came twice a year into the island of Capri in such vast numbers that the bishop of the island drew the chief part of his revenue from them, and that on the west coast of Naples, within the space of four or five miles, 100,000 had been taken in a day. Of the bird in a wild state in England, I have myself taken toll from three bevises in one day, as near to London as the parish of Langley, and within sight of the Royal Castle of Windsor; but the total number was few as compared with the ten or twelve brace a day killed by Mr. Newcome at South Ferry Fens, in Norfolk, as stated by Mr. Stevenson; and I have known similar instances of a like number having been procured by other sportsmen. In the year 1870, Quails came to this country in unusually large numbers, spreading themselves far and wide over England and Scotland, affording much sport to the pursuers of game; for the ground which is suited to the Partridge is equally so to this diminutive but highly nutritive species.

Who better than a clergyman, especially when he is at the same time an excellent ornithologist, ought to be able to settle the vexed question as to whether the "*selav*" of the Hebrews, with which they were so miraculously fed in the wilderness, was or was not the Quail? Surely, then, no apology is necessary for the insertion of the following extract from my friend the Rev. H. B. Tristram's 'Natural History of the Bible':—

"Ingenious commentators have spared no pains in the attempt to prove the '*selav*' was not a Quail, but some other creature they imagined more likely to be found in the desert. In spite of all etymology, and of the distinct allusion in the Psalms to *feathered* fowl, some have suggested locusts, some flying fish; others

have conjectured the Sand-Grouse, '*Kata*,' or the desert Shieldrake, *Casarca rutila*, found about salt lakes, a most uneatable bird; while Dean Stanley has put forward the idea of 'large red-legged Cranes, three feet high, with black and white wings, measuring seven feet from tip to tip,' by which he undoubtedly means the White Stork, the innumerable flights of which literally darkened the sky, he states, when camping near the Wady Huderah (Sinai & Palestine, p. 82).

"It is undoubtedly true that vast flocks of all these three species of birds do visit the Sinaitic desert at the time of migration; and I have also seen the Black Stork in almost as large numbers; while the Dean suggests the possibility of the Stork on account of its standing three feet high, and thus explaining the statement of their being two cubits from the ground. But besides that the flesh of these birds is abominable for food, while the Sand-Grouse is very dry and hard, and could scarcely have fully satisfied the hungry people, we have a clear proof of the identity of the Common Quail with the Hebrew '*selav*' in its Arabic name '*salua*,' from a root signifying 'to be fat,'—very descriptive of the round plump form and fat flesh of the Quail. The expression 'as it were two cubits high upon the face of the earth' probably refers to the height at which the Quails fly above the ground.

"There are several expressions in the scriptural account which are borne out by observations of the habits of the Quail. At all times its flight is very low, just skimming the surface of the ground, and, especially when fatigued, it keeps close. It migrates in vast flocks, and regularly crosses the Arabian desert, flying for the most part at night; and when the birds settle they are so utterly exhausted that they may be captured in any numbers by the hand. Being birds of weak flight they instinctively select the shortest sea-passages, and avail themselves of any island as a halting-place. Thus in spring and autumn they are slaughtered in numbers on Malta and many of the Greek islands, which they quit in a day or two, very few being seen until the period of migration comes round again. They also fly with the wind, never facing it, like many other birds.

"The period when they were brought to the Camp of Israel was in spring, when on their northward migration from Africa. According to their well-known instinct they would follow up the coast of the Red Sea till they came to its bifurcation by the Sinaitic Peninsula, and then, with a favouring wind, would cross at the narrow part, resting near the shore before proceeding. Accordingly we read that the wind brought them up from the sea, and that, keeping close to the ground, they fell thick as rain about the camp, in the month of April according to our calculation. Thus the miracle consisted in the supply being brought to the tents of Israel by the special guidance of the Lord, in exact harmony with the known habits of the bird. The Israelites 'spread them' out, when they had taken them before they were sufficiently refreshed to escape, 'round about the camp,' to dry and prepare them for food, exactly as Herodotus tells us the Egyptians were in the habit of doing with Quails, drying them in the sun.

"We thus see on careful comparison how the most ancient of all historical works and natural history reflect attesting lights on each other.

"The Quail's note, when once heard, will be always recognized—'Peek-whit-whit!' rapidly repeated, and somewhat resembling the sound of some species of locust. The bird is not gregarious during the breeding-season, and rears large beves of young, sometimes as many as sixteen in a brood. It is too well known to require description, and a Quail of the year is considered the most delicate eating of all game."

The mode of incubation of the Quail is very similar to that of the Partridge, the female depositing her eggs in a slight depression in the ground, either natural or scratched for their reception, in the centre of corn-fields, or amidst the covert of bordering scrubs or rough patches of ground. "The eggs," says Mr. Hewitson, "vary much in number, being from six to fourteen, though most commonly ten; they differ also in colour and markings." The egg figured by him as most characteristic of the species is of a deep buff, largely blotched round the centre with deep brown, has numerous reddish dots and stains over the remainder of its surface, and a large patch of dark brown near the smaller end; it measures one inch and a quarter in length by seven-eighths in breadth: a variety figured on the same plate is pale buff, numerously spotted all over with minute marks of deep brown and purple; and Mr. Hewitson says there are more as strikingly different.

The high spirit, ardour, and pugnacity of the Quail have been celebrated from ancient times to the present. "As quarrelsome as Quails in a cage" was a Greek proverb; and Quail-fighting was a favourite amusement with the Greeks and Romans, who kept it in numbers for this purpose as our forefathers did game-cocks; and in India and China Quail-fighting as well as Cock-fighting is still a popular amusement.

The Plate represents a male and female and a clutch of young ones, all of the natural size. The plants are the common Daisy and the Speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*, Linn.).

Gould, John. 1873. "Common Quail, *Coturnix communis* [Pl. 15]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323974>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/221609>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323974>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/323974>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.