

# Further records from southwest Saudi Arabia of Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei*

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This is a note on records in Saudi Arabia of Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei* since 1992. Harlequin Quail is a little known species in Saudi Arabia making its status difficult to ascertain. Meinertzhagen (1954) stated "Only known [in the Arabian peninsula] from four specimens in the British Museum obtained by Yerbury in March 1895 at Lahej [Yemen] and by Barnes at the same place. Both refer to the species as common, but it has not since been obtained in Arabia". Jennings (2010) mentioned "it is rarely recorded [in the Arabian peninsula] with no clear picture of its status, numbers and habitat". King (1978) mentioned four species not previously recorded in Saudi Arabia in the introduction to his paper and Harlequin Quail was amongst them. The first documented record in Saudi Arabia was a male seen by King in a maize field near Matri 14 April 1976. Matri cannot be found on any map and it is not clear where the exact location is but during that day, King was in southwest Saudi Arabia in the area of Abu Arish, Khasawiyah (16° 56' N, 42° 37' E), Jizan, and Hakimah. The location is presumably close to Jizan, probably south of 17° N. King also mentioned that in 1974 a pair, captured locally, was brought to Peter Manser (resident at Hakimah, 17° N). This is close to where the birds seen by King were encountered and predates King's record by two years. King (1978) also mentioned that Harlequin Quail is probably resident in extreme southwest Saudi Arabia but there is no supporting evidence in his paper. Stagg (1985) mentioned in his annotated checklist of the birds of southwest Saudi Arabia, which covered 1981–1983, that he had "scattered sightings the year round, throughout the southwest. Mainly confined to the lowland areas but a single November sighting at the 5000 feet level (1524 metres)" where terraced agriculture is practiced. The only other more recent record in Saudi Arabia, is one in December 1992, near the Yemen border, seen by Abdullah Al Suhaibany and Mike Jennings (pers comm). Rahmani *et al* (1994) made no mention of Harlequin Quail in their paper on birds from the coastal Tihamah region of Saudi Arabia, where studies were conducted 1987–1992 in the southwest of the Kingdom between Jeddah and Jizan. Most visits were conducted during the winter so little data was available from the spring and autumn migration or on summer breeders, but if the species was common and resident then sightings would be expected. Porter & Aspinall's (2010) field guide states that Harlequin Quail may breed in southwest Saudi Arabia and Yemen and is a vagrant in south Oman and Socotra.

I observed eight Harlequin Quails in southwest Saudi Arabia 30 June 2015 in a large grassy pivot irrigation field near Husayni along the main Ad Dabi–Sabya road (17° 09' 44.9" N, 42° 41' 27.7" E). The fields were very green, as they were being watered by a pivot irrigation system, with areas of tall, unidentified grasses interspersed with shorter grass with larger tufts. The field was visited in the middle of the day, the hottest time, so birds were only seen in flight as they flushed from short grass or one-metre-wide tracks created by the pivot irrigation equipment wheels. Most birds seen were females but two males were also seen and good views were obtained, allowing the bright colour and head pattern to be seen as they flew fast, low and for a long distance. This was the first time that the species had been recorded in Saudi Arabia since 1992, although it was not a major surprise as JB and Phil Roberts had seen a small Quail briefly on the ground in the same fields in June 2013 but could not be 100% certain it was a Harlequin Quail and not a Common Quail *Coturnix coturnix*. The timing of the sighting and that Common Quail does not breed in this part of the Kingdom makes the bird very likely to have been a Harlequin Quail.



**Plate 1.** Male Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei* near Husayni, Jizan province, Saudi Arabia, 8 July 2017. © Jem Babbington

On 2 June 2016, I went back to the same fields in the early morning and saw two birds in flight and at least three calling birds. The call of Harlequin Quail was played back and birds responded immediately, with one coming very close but remaining hidden in long grass. To avoid further disturbance to the birds the tape was only played once. On 7 July 2017 JB and PR returned to the fields at midday and saw two birds in flight, a male and a female in different parts of the field. The following day we returned at first light and heard a minimum of ten calling birds, out of which six were seen, including five males and a female. The large pivot field to the side of the one where the birds were seen and heard was also checked 8 July 2017 and a minimum of three calling birds heard despite the field being less well vegetated. PR returned to the same fields on 25 and 26 August 2017 and saw three birds on each visit showing they remained in the same fields for many weeks. Birds seen in the main field by us would run very quickly from one area of cover to another, and stay mainly hidden (Plate 1) but luckily one male ran, stopped in a slightly open area, called a couple of times, and ran off again (Plate 2).

If Harlequin Quails are resident in the Arabian peninsula then all presumably are *C. d. arabica* (Jennings 2010). This subspecies is slightly paler than the other races (n nominate, *histrionica*). It is distinguished by its much paler brown coloration (almost resembling the colouring of *C. coturnix coturnix* in tone) as might be expected of a bird inhabiting arid lands (Bannerman 1929). HBW states “race *arabica*, only slightly paler than others, [is]



**Plate 2.** Male Harlequin Quail *Coturnix delegorguei* near Husayni, Jizan province, Saudi Arabia, 8 July 2017. The bird does not look particularly pale, possibly supporting the notion that *C. d. arabica* may not be a valid race, although lack of information on how pale *arabia* is makes conclusions difficult. © Jem Babbington

possibly not valid, as most records in its range [are] considered [to be] probably migrants from Africa; further study [is] needed". McGowan & Kirwan (2017) state that Harlequin Quails have been recorded in all months in southwest Arabia, mainly in the late 1900s, where they are assumed to be resident.

No breeding information is available on the species in Arabia, so it is difficult to guess the breeding season. Pairs have been recorded in April but almost all calling birds had been recorded in November (Jennings 2010). The new records highlighted above, where a number of males and females were seen together and birds were calling in June and July, indicate the species may be breeding in the Jizan area at this time and were not on migration. The pivot irrigation fields where the birds were seen confirm the preferred habitat of lowland areas under cultivation mentioned by Jennings (2010) but the fields were growing grasses and not sorghum, maize and other cereals. A preferred habitat of green grass fields is backed up by the fact that at least two of the three Oman records of the species were from damp or at least green grassland (John Atkins pers comm). First egg dates are April–June for Ethiopia/Eritrea (Ash & Atkins 2009). Large pivot irrigation fields are limited in number in southwest Saudi Arabia with most fields being small-scale growing maize. Checking large pivot irrigation fields in Jizan province should add

valuable data on this under recorded species especially to help ascertain if Harlequin Quails are resident in the area and to confirm the breeding season.

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