

Breeding migrant Yellow-legged Buttonquail spotted at Udthagamandalam, Tamil Nadu



Female
Turnix tanki
found at
the Ooty
Municipal
Market.
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Rishi.

The Yellow-legged Buttonquail *Turnix tanki* Blyth, 1843 is a small quail growing to a length of 15–18 cm (6 to 7 in), the females being slightly larger and more brightly coloured than the males. The adult male Yellow-legged Buttonquail has a black crown bordered with buff and sometimes a buff streak in the centre. Its head is buff with black-tipped feathers, the throat is pale buff, deepening to reddish-buff at the breast edges, and turning white under the tail.

The breast sides have black spots. Its back and tail are

greyish-brown with reddish and dark markings, and the wings are blackish-brown with buff edges. The beak is dull yellow, the eyes are whitish, and the legs and feet are deep yellow. The adult female is richer in colour, with a broad reddish-brown collar on the neck, lighter spotting on the back, and brighter yellow beak and legs. In non-breeding season, the female's plumage becomes greyer. Juveniles resemble males but have duller colours and finer speckling (McGowan & Madge 2010).

Turnix tanki visits the northern and central subcontinent

during summer and extends to regions like Pakistan (Sind and Punjab) and northwestern India (Baker 1928). It resides in southwestern Gujarat, extending through the Gangetic plain and Nepal Terai, and also has a potential extension eastward to Bihar, Odisha, and the Nicobar Islands (Ali & Ripley 1980).

They migrate to the majority of the Indian Peninsula, the Assam Valley, lower parts of the Assam Hills, and the Andamans in winter and they primarily inhabit areas below 1,200 m but can be

found sometimes at altitudes of up to 2,000 m (Ali & Ripley 1980; Rathod 2023). Cultivation areas, grasslands, bamboo forests, scrublands, and other open habitats, often in disturbed environments are the areas where they are often found (Rathod 2023). March to November the breeding occurs with nests consisting of scantily lined scrapes partially covered by bent-over grass stems or other vegetation. The responsibility of taking care of the eggs and the young is done by the males (Rathod 2023).

On 12 October 2024, a pet shop owner in Udhagamandalam Municipal Market contacted us about a quail species they unexpectedly encountered in their shop. The bird had accidentally entered the premises, and the shop owner, thinking it might be rare, captured it. They recalled a previous awareness session we conducted on the importance of proper licensing for handling endangered or non-native species.

This session was held after an earlier intervention, when we found the shop selling Java Sparrows, an invasive species banned in the U.S. since the late 1960s and still illegal in California due to agricultural risks (Department of Fish and Wildlife 2021). With this background, the shop owner took a cautious approach and contacted us to ensure the quail was handled properly. Upon inspection, we identified the bird as a female Yellow-legged Buttonquail.

This unusual sighting prompted us to investigate further, as records of *T. tanki* at higher altitudes are rare. Using GBIF data, we analyzed its

distribution to gain a better understanding of its presence in elevated regions (Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2021). The data reveals that the species reaches some of its highest recorded altitudes in southern India: 1,880 m in Idukki District, Kerala (Robson 1984), 1,190 m in Chamrajnagar District, Karnataka (Jacob 2013), and 1,170 m in Coimbatore District, Tamil Nadu (Raghunathan 2014). Additionally, Chandrakala et al. (2021) reported sightings in the Indian Himalayan region, while Rathod (2023) documented its presence in Gujarat. Globally, Turnix tanki has been observed at even greater elevations, exceeding 4,000 m in Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces, China (Artuso 2005; Pepper 2013; Eaton 2014).

The presence of *T. tanki* in the Nilgiris is notable, as the species is rarely reported in the area. Its presence during October suggests its potential resilience in breeding time. Observing *T. tanki* in this region provides valuable insights into its distribution and highlights the need for focused conservation efforts to protect the species and its habitat in the Nilgiris. After the rescue, the species was released near a dense habitat, where it quickly flew toward the woods.

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Citation: Kesavan, R., A. Abinesh, M. Shahie, N. Moinudheen & N.S. Ali (2025). Breeding migrant Yellow-legged Buttonquail spotted at Udhagamandalam, Tamil Nadu Bird-o-soar #277, In: Zoo's Print 40(6): 17–19.