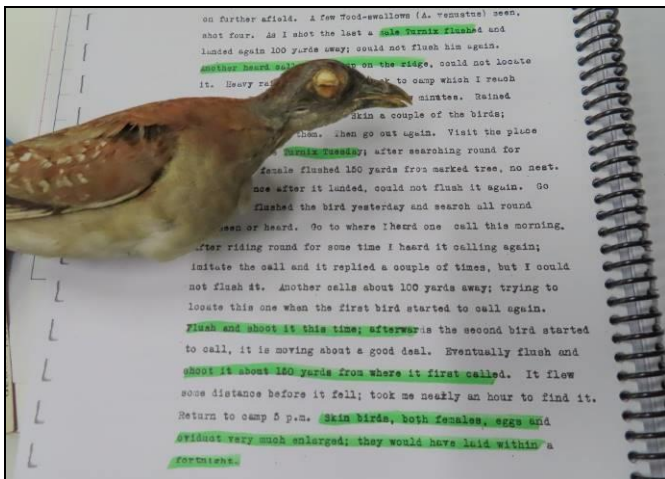


# BirdLife Northern Queensland Buff-breasted Button-quail Project Update

By Pat Webster

Despite the Buff-breasted Button-quail's endangered status, there has been a widely held belief that the species persists across an extensive area of northern Queensland. However, recent research conducted by the University of Queensland's Green Fire Science lab suggests our understanding of this species and its current distribution is inadequate. It appears the decline of this species has largely slipped under the radar, and to say we should be concerned for Buff-breasted Button-quail is an understatement.



Green Fire Science began researching the Buff-breasted Button-quail in 2018, funded by the National Environmental Science Programme, Birds Queensland, Graham Harrington Scholarship and the Conservation Wildlife Research Trust. We knew this endeavour was going to be particularly challenging; however, not one of us could have foreseen the hurdles and direction this project would follow. The aim was clear and simple; what are the basic ecological requirements of the Buff-breasted Button-quail and what are its threatening processes. Initially, we set out to find a population of Buff-breasted Button-quail and study them intensively. Given that most birders and local guides seemed able to locate the species within a few days or weeks of searching, we thought it would not be long until we also would uncover the secrets of this mysterious species.

Unfortunately, despite three years spent searching a large proportion of Cape York Peninsula, including all of the known former haunts of the species, we have failed to locate a single Buff-breasted Button-quail.

Conversely, in excess of 200 Painted Button-quail, and dozens of the other button-quail species have been recorded, including range extensions for both the Little Button-quail and Chestnut-backed Button-quail. Interestingly the highest densities of Painted Button-quail appear to be in areas where Buff-breasted Button-quail have been previously recorded such as the infamous truck-stop, Big Mitchell Creek, Mareeba Wetlands, Mt Mulligan, Brooklyn, Mt Carbine, Davies Creek and Mt Molloy. Despite multiple records of the Buff-breasted Button-quail from these locations by scientists, naturalists and bird guides over the years, we have failed to detect a single individual.

The frustration of failure, despite exhaustive search effort, has initiated a more detailed review of the literature and further consultation with the birding community. This revealed that the last sighting of this species to be supported by verifiable evidence dates back to the early 1920's from the small Cape York town of Coen. These were the records of William Rae McLennan, who shot and collected several birds for H. L. White. Given the last verified record was almost a century ago it is very surprising that the species has not received more concern and attention. In the coming year we are aiming to improve awareness of the species and its plight.

Despite these difficulties, the focus of our project has not shifted from the conservation of the Buff-breasted Button-quail. However, we have broadened the project scope to investigate the ecology of the closely related Chestnut-backed Button-quail and the apparently co-occurring Painted Button-quail. Australia's tropical button-quail are poorly understood and our research has led to novel observations regarding the ecology of both these related species. We are hopeful that our findings regarding the Painted and Chestnut-backed Button-quail will give us insights into the closely related Buff-breasted Button-quail, providing a clearer picture of that species conservation needs.

We are immensely grateful for the support and cooperation of BirdLife Northern Queensland community and particularly the support of the Graham Harrington Scholarship. Given the interest in this bird locally we will be sure to keep the BirdLife community aware of our findings as we progress.

**Editor's note:** Patrick was the first recipient of a BirdLife Northern Queensland Graham Harrington Scholarship (GHS). This report is a requirement of the scholarship and we thank him for it. Applications for the 2020 GHS are currently being received and the successful applicant/s will be informed in December. Stay tuned for the announcement early in the New Year.