



A Study of a Small Buttonquail, *Turnix sylvaticus*

Calcutta, India, c. 1800

Watercolour on J Whatman paper

Provenance: Collector's seal on verso in Persian: 'The Right Honourable Lord Bahadur Viscount Valentia, 1217 (1802-3)'

40cm high, 26cm wide

Stock no.: A5494

True to its name, the small buttonquail is a diminutive bird, measuring up to a mere 15cm. Reluctant flyers, they tend to skulk through dry grasslands, making them extremely difficult to find. Despite their quail-like appearance, they lack the crop and hind toe of true quails and are in fact more closely related to shorebirds. The buttonquail's geographical range is extensive, stretching from India, tropical Asia and Indonesia to Africa. Regrettably, the last buttonquails in Europe were declared extinct in 2018. Intensive agriculture and coastal development in southern Spain led to their demise. Unfortunately, the current population in Morocco is also facing similar challenges.

An unusual trait of the small buttonquail is that the females are polyandrous. Having laid four to five eggs, they will seek another mate, leaving the male to incubate the eggs and raise the chicks. Females also possess unique vocal organs, enabling them to produce long, deep calls, often made at dawn and dusk.

The present study depicts an alert small bird with stunningly intricate patterned feathers. The cryptic plumes of the upperparts consist of blacks and greys, with vivid flashes of cinnamon. The rufous chest feathers are interspersed with elegant black diamond patterns and the flanks and belly are greyish-

white. Similar to the wings, the tail feathers are finely barred with quivering lines of black and chestnut, enhancing the bird's ability to conceal itself amongst foliage. With its diminutive body and large feet, one can easily imagine this charming small bird scuttling amongst the dried grasses as it beadily hunts for seeds and insects. Through this lively and vibrant depiction of the buttonquail, the artist succeeds in reproducing the bird's quaint and colourful character.

For additional ornithological studies made for Lord Valentia, see Sotheby's Sven Gahlin Collection Lot 36 a drawing of a bustard, and Lot 37 a watercolour of a crow-pheasant, both made for Lord Valentia; Sotheby's, London, 31 May 2011, The Stuart Cary Welch Collection, Part Two, lot 115; see also Welch 1976, no.26; Welch 1978-I, nos.18a-c.and Leach 1995, no.7.96, pp.760-2. For two bird studies donated by Viscount Valentia to Lord Wellesley, see British Library in London (Wellesley Collection, NHD 29, vol. iv, f.21,27)

Literature

Bikram Grewal et al. 2016. Birds of India - A Pictorial Field Guide. Om Books International.

Phil McGowan and Steve Madge. 2010. Pheasants, Partridges & Grouse: Including Buttonquails, Sandgrouse and Allies. Helm Identification Guides, Bloomsbury Publishing.