On the Hunting of the Common Quail (*Coturnix coturnix* Linnaeus, 1758) Along the Mediterranean Coast of the Gaza Strip – Palestine

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البقرة (57)
Palestine (27,000 km$^2$) harbors more than 540 bird species.

The coast of the Gaza Strip is a pathway for many migratory birds, which explains the setting up of nets in early autumn, waiting for the arrival of the Common Quail (*Coturnix Coturnix* Linnaeus, 1758).

The Common Quail is the only long-distance migrant of all the western Palaearctic Phasianidae.

It is categorized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as "least concern".

The bird is of special concern because of its overhunting in the Mediterranean basin.

The Common Quail was mentioned in the Holy Quran three times by the name "Al-Salwa" because of its delicious flesh and nutritional values.
INTRODUCTION

- The Gaza Strip, which lies at the southwestern corner of Palestine, is home to a considerable number of bird fauna; both resident and migratory.
- During autumn migration of each year, the Gazans set trammel nets along most of the Mediterranean coast of the Gaza Strip, which extends for more than 40 km.
- A large number of the Common Quail is commonly captured or trapped by these nets.
- The nets also illegally capture other migratory and resident birds.
OBJECTIVES & IMPORTANCE

- The current descriptive study aims at introducing information on the hunting of the Common Quail (*Coturnix Coturnix* Linnaeus, 1758) in the Gaza Strip.
- The importance of this study comes from the fact that it is the first of its kind and style in dealing with and focusing on the Common Quail as a bird loved by most Gazans.
MATERIALS & METHODS

Gaza Strip

- The Gaza Strip (365 km²) is an arid to semi-arid coastal zone lying in the southern part of the Palestinian coast along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.
- The local average annual rainfall is 300 mm.
- Sand dunes are the main feature of the western part of the Gaza Strip, while the clay and clayey lands predominate in the eastern part.
- The Gaza Strip has a population of about 2.3 million (5,500 inhabitants per square kilometer).
MATERIALS & METHODS

Procedure

- Since 2015, tens of field visits have been held in the early hours of the morning to places of erecting trammel nets along the Mediterranean beach of the Gaza Strip, to observe and monitor the hunting of Common Quails and other non-target birds in the Gaza Strip.
- Discussions with local people and stakeholders including bird and quail hunters and breeders have been carried out to get more information on quail hunting and rearing in the Gaza Strip.
- Binoculars and digital cameras were commonly used for observations and documentation.
- Animal markets, pet shops and zoological gardens (zoos) have been visited to study their quail and bird content.
- Available local, regional and international guide books have been referred to in order to identify the non-target bird species incidentally falling in quail nets.
RESULTS
In autumn of each year, Gazans see hundreds of nets, at a distance of 100-200 meters off the coastline, for Quail hunting.

The color of the threads of the worn out fishing trammel nets is camouflaging to birds.

Common Quails arrive exhausted and tired to the shores of the Gaza Strip, after traveling long distances of more than three thousand kilometers to rest on land, and collide with nets that extend over large areas of the sea shore, get stuck inside and fall prey there.

 Hunters begin to remove quails from the nets carefully, and put them in metal cages or sealed bags waiting for buyers who roam with their cars and motorcycles in order to get these delicious birds.
The number of caught birds reaches from ZERO to twenty spouses per a hunter.

- Birds of prey may fall into nets.
- Although trammel nets are the main method of quail hunting, the use of guns to hunt quails and other birds is a common practice as well.
- Quail escaping the nets and landing among low-growing herbaceous plants were found to be subject to shooting by guns by highly skilled bird hunters.
Importance of Common Quail Hunting

- The Common Quail is a source of livelihood for dozens of Gazan families exhausted by the Israeli siege, low socio-economic standards, poverty and unemployment.
- Some consider it just a hobby because it is not enough to sustain a livelihood.
- Some hunters complain about Common Quails coming out of the sea and flying at a higher altitude than their nets whose height is no more than 2.5 meters, which reduces the chances of them, falling into the nets.
The Scarcity of Locally Caught Common Quails

- In the past years, hunters used to catch large quantities of quails, exceeding 500 birds, during one season.
- The quantities of the bird that arrive the Gaza Strip do not exceed 20% of the amount that arrived 30-40 years ago, as a result of different factors as follows:
  1. High numbers of hunters
  2. The number of Common Quails reaching the Gaza Strip during their migration decreased due to their population declines in Europe.
  3. The change of these birds to their migration direction towards Egypt, especially Sinai, Port Said and Alexandria.
  4. Environmental factors play a major role in reducing the arrival of these birds to the Gaza Strip, in light of the increase in urbanization, residential expansion and scarcity of agricultural areas.
  5. The strong air currents and the rise of sea waves to high levels lead to a reduction in the opportunity for the Common Quail to reach the shores of the Gaza Strip and collide with nets. In such conditions, the birds fly at very high levels, in search of other areas where they can settle.
  6. The climate change is a global environmental issue affecting the global bird and other wildlife migrations including that of the Common Quail.
Non-target Birds Fall into Quail Nets

- The primary quarry of erecting trammel nets 100-200 meters off the Gaza Strip coastline is the Common Quail.
- Nets are indiscriminate, resulting in a wide range of other non-target migrant and resident bird species also being incidentally caught.
- Some bird hunters release non-targeted birds, but the majority feels lucky having these birds falling in their nets.
- 50 bird species (12 orders and 29 families) falling in quail nets as noted by the author himself or by quail hunters met.
- 50% of these birds were passerines.
Non-target Birds Fall into Quail Nets

Non-target bird species incidentally caught by quail nets: (A) Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*), (B) Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*), (C) European Serin (*Serinus serinus*), (D) Spotted Corncrake (*Porzana porzana*), (E) White-spectacled Bulbul (*Pycnonotus xanthopygos*), (F) Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), (G) European Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*) and (H) Masked Shrike (*Lanius nubicus*)
Why Do Gazans Breed Quails?

- The demand of Gazans for purchasing the Common Quail and its eggs increases in spite of the bird's small size, as it is rich in vitamins and minerals that folk doctors often prescribe to a number of Gazan patients for treatment of various diseases.
- The popularity of quail breeding in the Gaza Strip comes as a result of the following advantages (NEXT PAGE):
Why Do Gazans Breed Quails?

- The Common Quail is a fast and cheap source for the production of animal protein from meat and eggs, and it plays a major role in reducing the avian meat crisis in the Gaza Strip.
- The Common Quail is able to adapt to several breeding patterns and with various environmental conditions, as it can live in batteries or cages or even on the ground or indoors.
- The Common Quail has a short maturity period; after 35 days of hatching they can be sold as meat for consumption. This reduces the investment period, while it produces eggs in abundance, at a rate of 250 - 300 eggs per year per a female.
- The Common Quail is not expensive to be farmed. The capital involved in raising quails is low compared to investment in similar projects such as raising chickens or turkeys.
- The Common Quail does not take up a large area, so one square meter can accommodate 80 – 100 quail birds. This is a large number compared to its farm-raised counterparts.
- The Common Quail, which is locally farmed, has low price; compared to other birds.
- The Common Quail is somewhat resistant to diseases and is not affected by the seasons of the year.
- The culture of the Gazan population in consuming famed quails is expanding day by day.
- The Common Quail farming increases the creation of new job opportunities, especially for young people and university graduates who suffer from poverty and unemployment.
- The Common Quail produces residues that are commonly known among the Gazans as efficient agricultural fertilizers.
Perception of Gazans towards Wild and Farmed Quails

- When asked about the difference in price and taste between wild and farmed quails, most Gazans admitted the price of wild quail is between USD 6 – 7 per pair, while the price for farmed quail does not exceed USD 2 per pair.
- The taste of wild quails is in no way can it compare with the farmed.
- They added that the Common Quail holds the distinction of being one of the birds mentioned in the *Quran*, referenced in the story of Moses and the exodus from Egypt. When Allah provided the Israelites with food in the desert, it came in the form of manna and quails falling from the sky.
CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

- In conclusion, the weak implementation of environmental legislations and laws of wildlife poaching and hunting in the Gaza Strip allowed a lot of Gazans to practice this profession with no restrictions.

- With regard to the Common Quail, it is necessary to set determinants that regulate the work of this seasonal hunting, and force hunters to adhere to them and punish violators.
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