**quail**

**what are they?**

Quail is a collective name for several species of birds with similar appearance and behaviours. Quail are medium-sized (though tiny from the poultry-keeper’s perspective) birds that are shy and ground dwelling. They eat insects, seeds and other plants. They live in pairs, small family groups or larger groups depending on season and circumstances.

Domestic quail generally come from 2 families: The ‘Old World’ quail (Phasianidae) and the ‘New World’ quail (Odontophoridae). Old World quail, originating mostly in east Asia, include the species most commonly kept for meat and egg production – such as the Coturnix and some ornamental species like the Chinese painted quail. New World species, from N. and S. America, include those traditionally kept as game birds such as the bobwhite. These are also kept for meat and, to a lesser extent, eggs. The Coturnix quail (Coturnix japonica) is the most commonly kept quail. It’s often called the Japanese quail. Originally domesticated in the 11th or 12th century as a song bird, it’s been bred for eggs since the 1900s. There are now distinct breeds of this species, e.g. the Japanese, English white and Italian. These vary a little in size, so some may be more suitable for meat, but in general they vary only in appearance.

**what can I do?**

Getting your quail: the easiest quail is the Coturnix. They the most productive, least flighty and hardiest species. There are ‘Jumbo’ breeds for meat. You can hatch your own birds with an incubator, a heat lamp and an indoor space for the chicks. For tame birds, hatch your own. Otherwise buy 8-week-old quail, ready to live in their adult enclosure. You may be able to find a local breeder locally, or you can order hatching eggs online. Quail can be kept in large mixed groups, but have at least 2 females to every male to prevent aggression and over-mating.

**Housing:** quail are susceptible to attack from cats, rats and foxes. They can fly away if startled and won't return. Their daytime accommodation needs to be cat-proof and covered, and night-time accommodation, rat-proof. This could mean a mesh base on their run or being shut up at night. Quail are often kept in rabbit hutches. These can make good night-time accommodation and shelters; quail don't need nest boxes or perches. A larger run should be provided. They will fly directly upwards when startled and, in an enclosed space, will hit their heads and can injure themselves, so runs should have high roofs and netting below to soften any impact. Accommodation needs to be well ventilated; quail droppings produce a lot of ammonia. Quail need protection from the cold in winter. Put their house in a sheltered spot, cover it in an old blanket on cold nights and provide plenty of bedding. Provide things to hide behind and under such as rocks, branches, logs or old plant pots. They should also have areas to dust bathe. Houses should be at ground level or raised slightly with a shallow ramp. Give them space and interest in to prevent them from becoming bored and stressed.

**what are the benefits?**

If you don’t have space for chickens but you want meat and eggs from your garden, quail might be for you. Coturnix quail are easy to manage and require less space than other poultry. They’re fast-growing, sexually mature at c. 8 weeks, can produce up to 300 eggs per year, and have an excellent feed-to-egg conversion ratio. Quails' eggs are around one fifth the size of a chicken's egg and taste similar. They're used in salads but can be used any way a hen's egg can. If you get a glut, they're great for pickling.

If you can sell your quail eggs and meat directly to restaurants you should get a good price. The novelty value can make them easier to market to individual consumers as well. Selling hatching eggs or adult birds can provide an additional income, especially if you keep some of the more ornamental breeds, although they're less productive.

Quail are undeniably cute and, if raised from hatching, can be very tame. Their small size means there's no issue with aggression towards small children as there can be with the males of larger poultry, and their calls are pleasant and unlikely to annoy the neighbours.
Quails are omnivorous and require a varied diet to thrive. They need fresh water, grit, and fresh greens. A high-protein diet is essential, especially for breeding females. It’s crucial to keep their environment clean and safe from predators. Quails need plenty of space to forage and exercise, which helps prevent obesity and stress.

Feeding: Feeding is crucial for quails’ health and productivity. Specialized feeds are available for adult breeding or laying quails, providing the necessary protein (18-20%). Feeding should be introduced gradually from 8 weeks. If specialized chick crumbs or grower pellets aren't available, unmedicated turkey feeds can be used, provided they offer the right amount of protein. Quails need space to forage, and they should always have fresh water and grit. If laying, they also need a source of calcium, such as cuttlefish, to prevent beak and nail overgrowth.

Breeding: Quails are non-broody, making them easy to handle. They don’t sit on eggs or lay in the same place. Encouraging them with nesting materials can help them incubate eggs. When quails do incubate, they often don’t look after the chicks, so human intervention may be necessary. The small egg size makes hatching under a broody hen challenging. Incubators can be used, sometimes requiring an additional tray for small eggs. The incubation period for Coturnix quails is 18 days, but this may vary for other species.

Health: Dust baths are beneficial for controlling external parasites like lice and mites. Providing a box of dry soil or sand can help. Assuming they do get lice, dusting with lice powder is less stressful than applying it directly. Regular cleaning with a pressure washer or steam cleaner can help control internal parasites. Mites can be a problem, so dusting with diatomaceous earth can be effective. Worming twice a year is recommended to prevent internal parasites.

Meat production & slaughter: Quails can be slaughtered after a season of laying. They are relatively easy to pluck, although care and practice are required. Legal permission is needed before slaughtering for family consumption. Quails are easy to dispatch and can be processed humanely. Regular cleaning and hygiene practices are essential to prevent disease and maintain animal welfare. Slaughtering and processing on farm must also be registered with the relevant authorities.

Resources: For more information, visit the provided websites and links. There are many resources available, including books, courses, and articles. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter can also provide useful information and community support.

Japanese Coturnix quail. Regularly clean the house with a pressure washer, special detergent, and steam cleaner. Dust with diatomaceous earth or mite powder (organic products). Treat for worms twice a year. To avoid chemical wormers, perform faecal egg count on droppings to check for worms. Visit the website for more details.

Paperwork and regulations: You must register with DEFRA if you keep more than 50 birds (including other types of poultry). There are no regulations for keeping fewer than 50 birds as long as you follow general animal welfare rules and regulations.