

Crypturellus soui (Little Tinamou)

Family: Tinamidae (Tinamous)

Order: Tinamiformes (Tinamous)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Little tinamou, *Crypturellus soui*.

[<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/little-tinamou-crypturellus-soui/little-tinamou-caratinga-reserve-minas-gerais-brazil>, downloaded 10 November, 2012]

TRAITS. A small bird about 9 inches long with very short wings and tail - some would even describe the *Crypturellus soui*, also known as the little tinamou as being tail-less (Skutch, 1963). The little tinamou has an overall dull colour with the upper parts of the body being a seal-brown, the plumage on the under-side of its rear end however is grayish (Skutch, 1963). The plumage is almost identical in both sexes with the the upper chest, the sides of the neck and the throat fading into a deep greyish-brown colour while the pileum is a granite-like black and the sides of the head is grey (Skutch, 1963). In addition, this bird possesses a whitish throat and upper chin and a black bill with brown to yellow eyes and greenish yellow feet (Skutch, 1963).

ECOLOGY. The little tinamou is a terrestrial bird that finds its habitat amongst the dense, low vegetation and woodlands in the humid regions from as far north as southern Mexico through Central America straight down to Trinidad (Skutch, 1963). It favours abandoned cassava, banana and coffee plantations in these regions and particularly sugar cane fields (Skutch, 1963). In Trinidad it can be found in pine plantations (Hayes and Samad, 1998). In its habitat the little tinamou feeds on small insects and seeds especially (James, 2007).

ACTIVITY. In most instances the little tinamou is flightless (James, 2007) and in some cases even when danger is detected they still choose to walk but if startled they suddenly take off in flight with a loud burst and disappear (Skutch, 1963). These birds tread very lightly so much so that they can hardly be heard and they are not seen often either (Skutch, 1963).

COMMUNICATION. The little tinamou comes from a line of “songless” birds however its vocals are distinct and quite clear (Skutch, 1963). The bird from time to time emits sounds throughout the year both during the day and at night however, their singing is most frequent during the late evenings and very early mornings (Skutch, 1963). The little tinamou produces whistles as opposed to songs but as these whistles are repeated they do it in such an exquisite way that it varies in structure and volume increases with the duration of the repetitions (Skutch, 1963). In a study done by Skutch (1963) it was observed that when a male started whistling in the evening a female would respond and this would go on for longer than about 20 minutes, it came across as if it were a call to the female initially then when the response was received a sing-song melody proceeded as if they were “talking” to each other. The little tinamou makes sounds similar to the great tinamou at times but the structures of the sounds emitted from the former are more varied (Skutch, 1963) - the sounds of the latter however are more powerful.

BREEDING BEHAVIOUR. The little tinamou breeds predominantly throughout the year however it was found that in Trinidad it breeds mainly in the month of May (Skutch, 1963). It is one of the species of birds that exhibits paternal care (Ridley, 1978) since the male incubates the egg and also rears the hatchlings (Skutch, 1963). The eggs are a beautiful, glossy purple about 4 cm long and wide and either one or two are laid at a time (Skutch, 1963). Incubation is done mainly after midday straight into the night (Skutch, 1963). The male sits on the egg (which is laid amongst leaves and other vegetation in the nest) and holds its position for hours on end shifting and changing positions periodically but it never abandons the egg before dark (Skutch, 1963). A study done by Skutch (1963) showed that when a male was approached while incubating an egg it would depress its head into its feathers and raise its rear end to reveal the beautifully coloured egg. The exact reason for this action is not certain. If the intruder still persists, however, the bird suddenly bursts into flight and takes off to where it cannot be seen (Skutch, 1963).

When an egg is about to hatch the male remains on it until the hatchling totally emerges from under the parent by ruffling the plumage on the underside of the parent (Skutch, 1963). When the hatchling has emerged the parent moves a short distance away into the bushes and gives a brief whistle in a low tone and pauses for a response- the parent does this until a response is heard from the hatchling (Skutch, 1963). The hatchling’s response is quite faint but it tries to mimic the sound it hears from its parent (Skutch, 1963). The parent remains in the bushes and continues to whistle or “call” the newly hatched bird pausing periodically to listen for the response which gets louder as it draws nearer to the parent (Skutch, 1963). During Skutch’s

study of the little tinamou (1963) he observed that when the male called out to the hatchling a few times, a response was heard from a female believed to be the mother of the bird; the male whistled back in response to her call and after that she was heard no more- aside from this, the mother made no other interferences. Additionally, he also found that after the few first hours of birth the little tinamou is taught to whistle as well as listen to whistles or “calls” and walk as well as follow the sound of its parent before it is fed.

ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR. As previously mentioned the little tinamou treads very lightly or sits still allowing intruders to come quite close to it (Skutch, 1963). It takes off in flight if an intruder is persistent, however, numerous studies done have shown that this is the most it does - it does not threaten with loud shrieks or attempts to pick at a potential predator. However, Skutch (1963) noticed what he described as a “distraction display” while doing his study when he approached a male who was incubating an egg that had begun to hatch. As he approached the male it flew off suddenly into the nearby bushes but then it returned and walked past him very slowly but intently with drooped wings that were shaking lightly and it maintained this poise until it faded into a nearby thicket (Skutch, 1963).

REFERENCES

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Fig. 2. A newly hatched little tinamou.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Tinamou, downloaded 13 November, 2012]

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