

# THE CHUKAR PARTRIDGE OF ASIA

## WHAT WILL IT EXTERMINATE?

An eminent biologist has said that no species of wild life can be successfully introduced except at the expense of some existing form of wild life. Attempts have recently been made to introduce the Indian Chukar with some prospect of success. A single Chukar hen has been said to have laid 136 eggs in one year in captivity. The Chukar will probably establish itself in Canterbury and Central Otago but fail in North Auckland and most districts having a heavy rainfall.

What other form of wild life it will displace, if the imported species gets strongly established, remains to be seen. The following interesting description of the chukar by Gordon H. True, Jr., of the Californian Bureau of Game Conservation, appears in "California Fish and Game" (July, 1937):—

The chukar (*Alectoris graeca chukar*) is one of twenty-two varieties of a single species of partridge that is found from Northern China and Mongolia, through India, Persia and Arabia to Asia Minor and southern Europe. In Asia, this partridge ranges as far west as the Holy Land, and in Europe to the Alps and middle and southern Italy. The species, or rather group of closely related varieties to which the chukar belongs, has a well-known relative in the person of "the Frenchman" or red-legged partridge of Europe (*Alectoris rufa rufa*), and another in the Barbary partridge (*Alectoris barbara barbara*), of the desert plains of North Africa.

The chukar presents a striking appearance with his red beak and feet, black necklace around a white (sometimes buff) throat, and the handsome vertical bars of black and brown on his grey flanks. When seen in his natural surroundings, however, he blends so perfectly with the background that he may escape detection by the keenest observer through the simple expedient of just "sitting tight."

In choice of habitat, the chukar is one of the most versatile of birds. Hume, in "Indian Sporting Birds," states that, "in one place it faces a temperature of 150 degrees F., in another braves a cold, about daybreak, of a little above zero; here it thrives where the annual rainfall exceeds 100 inches, and there flourishes where it is

practically arid." Apparently the only climate that a chukar can not stand is the incessant damp of a rain forest. It is found at altitudes ranging from sea level to 16,000 feet. To quote again from Hume, the chukar is equally at home "on open grassy hillsides in the hot, low valleys; on stony screes covered with a light growth of barberry bushes and amongst snows at 12,000 feet. It is this ability of the chukar to survive under such a variety of conditions that has encouraged its introduction into California—a land of contrasts where this bird must certainly find a favourable environment.

In India, the chukar breeds in April or as late as September, depending on the altitude. A pair of birds will naturally take up housekeeping much later at an altitude of 16,000 feet than they will at a 1000-foot elevation. The nest is built in a hollow scratched in the ground which may or may not be lined with grass or leaves. The nest may be built in the open or in the protecting shelter of a stone or bit of herbage. Sowerby in "A Sportsman's Miscellany" remarks that the nest "is very hard to find, usually being carefully hidden amongst the boulders and scanty scrub at the base of cliffs in narrow ravines and gorges." A chukar hen will lay on the average a clutch of fourteen eggs. The eggs are yellowish white and speckled to a varying degree with brown.

Sowerby states that "young hatched in June are fully fledged by the end of August. By September the chukars are fully grown and ready for shooting." During the fall months, the pairs, with their rapidly maturing young, gather into coveys of from thirty to several hundred birds. They remain in coveys throughout the winter, breaking up into pairs at the beginning of the next breeding season.

The food of the chukar consists of reeds, small fruits and berries, leaves, green shoots and some types of roots. They also take insects and insect larvae when they are available. Chukars are very fond of cultivated grains but seldom enter fields in which crops are standing. They prefer to glean in the open fields after the harvest.