



BELDERČĪN

BELDERČĪN (quail, *Coturnix coturnix* L.; fam. Phasianidae). The wide distribution of the quail in the Near and Middle East (see Hüe and Etchécopar, pp. 225-26) and its relative abundance as both a migratory and sedentary bird are reflected in a great number of Arabic and especially Iranian names, “standard” and dialectal: in classical Persian *bowdana/būdana*, *karak*, *samānī/samāna/samān*, *valaj/valač/velaj*, etc., *vartej/vartīj/vertīj/vardīj*, etc., *vošm* (cf. the title or name *Vošmgīr*, lit. “quail catcher,” borne by the second Ziyarid ruler of Ṭabarestān and Gorgān, who was infatuated with hunting and hawking); in contemporary Persian (and in some Persian dialects, e.g., Kermāni) *badbada* and *beldeṛčīn* (a Turkish word, which is the most common current designation); in Caspian dialects *vošūm/vošom* (Lāhījān, parts of Māzandarān, Gorgān), *ošūm/ūšūm* (Rašt, Anzālī), *varde* (Deylamān, Āmol), etc.; in Semnāni dialects *badbadā*, *varde*; in Kurdish dialects *badbada*, *hawērda*, *karak*, *kar(a)wāla*, *qorqorūk*, *samānak*, etc. (for these and other Kurdish names, see Mokrī, pp. 107-08); in Baḳtīārī *tūhī*; in Baluchi *batera*, *jangali bat*; in Pashto *nwaraz*; in classical Arabic *qatīl al-ra’d* (lit., “thunder-killed,” because, according to Šarīf Edrīsī [d. ca. 560/1165], as quoted by Ebn al-Bayṭār, III, p. 32, “it dies [of fright] upon hearing the thunder”), *salwā* and *somānā* (some authors, however, do not consider these two the same bird; see e.g., Tonokābonī, s.vv., who equates *salwā* with the Tk. *yalve/yelve* and the Tonokābonī *las-e bāl* [= water rail, *Rallus aquaticus*], and *somānā* with the Tk. *bildeṛčīn* [sic], Māzandarānī *varde*, and Deylami *voš(ə)m*); for the variants of *somānā* (*sommān*, etc.)—arabicized from *samānī*—and for dialectal Arabic names, see Ma’lūf, pp. 198-99.



The quail is mentioned in both the Bible and the Qur’ān. According to the Bible (Exodus 16:13, Numbers 11:31-33, etc.), Jehovah sent down—in addition to manna—large flocks of quail (*šelāw*) to provide the starving Israelites with food in the wilderness. The Qur’ān refers three times quite casually (Cairo ed., 2:57, 7:160, 20:80) to these two divine boons (*mann* “manna” and *salwā* “quail”) to the children of Israel. Allusions to these Koranic reminiscences are occasionally found in Persian poetry as unexpected (God-sent) boons. One of the earliest allusions is by Lāme’ī Gorgānī (5th/11th century): “Rain and snow are now falling on us from the cloud, like quail (*samān*) raining from the sky upon the sons of Israel” (*Dīvān*, ed. S. Nafīsī, Tehran, 1319 Š./1941, p. 156). Nāṣer-e Kōsrow (quoted in Dehḳodā’s *Loḡat-nāma*, s.v.) adjured: “Refuse to talk to an ignorant person, for it is not appropriate to place the *mann* or the *salwā* before a pig.”

Various virtues are attributed to the quail in traditional or popular Islamic medicine. According to Ebn Sīnā (II, p. 252) eating quail flesh causes *tamaddod* (strain, distension) and *tašannoj* (convulsion, spasm), “not because the quail feeds only on *karbaq* [hellebore] but because this *qowwa* [virtue, force] is inherent in its flesh.” Tonokābonī (loc. cit.), dismissing the report that the quail (*somānā/bilderčīn*) feeds “mostly” on hellebore and reflecting the views of some previous authors (especially Dāwūd Anṭākī, *Taḍkera* I, p. 173), says that quail flesh is very nutritious, fattening, diuretic, lithotriptic, and aphrodisiac (for women only); that licking daily a grain of the *zahra* (gall bladder) of a quail, coated with honey, is unequaled for curing epilepsy; that dropping quail blood into an aching ear soothes the pain; and (on the authority of Abu’l-Faraj b. Telmīd, d. 560/1165) that eating a whole roasted quail (“with no part thereof discarded”) cures a person bitten by a mad dog. According to Qazvīnī (Cairo ed., p. 278), the quail keeps silent all winter, but when spring arrives it starts crying at dawn; it feeds on *bīš* (aconite), which is a deadly poison.

Another legend, mentioned in some Persian sources (e.g., *Borhān-e qāte’*, s.v. *samānī*), that the quail rises from (or comes out of) the sea, is traceable to a misinterpretation by some earlier Arab authors of a migratory phenomenon in the Mediterranean basin. Damīrī (I, pp. 563-64) quotes Mortazā Zabīdī (d. 1205/1790): “The *somāna* . . . is a migratory bird, [but] where it comes from is not known; so certain people say it comes out of the salt sea (*al-baḥr al-māleḥ*), flying [*sic*] over the sea while one of its wings is immersed in the sea and the other spread on it like a sail.” The fact is that quails are physically unfit for long flights and, when forced to migrate, take advantage of favorable winds to



effect their long journeys (see Hüe and Etchécopar, loc. cit.). Flocks of quail from Europe migrate to North Africa and eastern Mediterranean countries in the fall and back to Europe in March and April (Ma'lūf, loc. cit.). During those treks the birds often become exhausted, fall into the sea (apparently managing to survive as Zabīdī described), are blown ashore, and settle on the ground to rest. It is then that the weary birds are easily caught in nets or even by hand. This biannual phenomenon also may explain the miracle of *salwā* reported in the Old Testament and alluded to in the Qur'ān (see *Encyclopaedia Judaica* XIII, Jerusalem, 1978, s.v. quail).

Another legend is based on a fanciful interpretation of the quail's cry: Supposedly the *badbada* (actually an onomatopoeic imitation of the male's cry) is so called because, having eaten one grain of wheat from the possessions of a child and having then repented of his evil deed, he repeats "bad bad e" (bad is bad; cf. the popular French moralistic interpretation of the same cry: *Paye tes dettes*, i.e., pay your debts). The quail's chattering, taken for loquacity, has, in turn, led to the popular belief that eating its eggs generates fluency and eloquence in speech and causes young children to speak precociously (Anṭākī, loc. cit.; Tonokābonī, s.v. *somānā*; the same effect is popularly attributed to the eating of sparrow heads).

Owing to its delicious flesh, the quail has always been valued as a game bird. In Iran in the past it was hunted with falcons (or hawks) or trapped. Nowadays quail hunters, guided by their dogs, beat the bushes and fields to raise the quails, which they shoot on the wing with shotguns (Mokrī, p. 109). M. Pāyanda (pp. 480-81) describes the way in which the quail (*vūšūm*) is still caught in his native eastern Gīlān: The local quail catcher follows his pointer through fodder fields, dried rice fields, and the like, where the quail usually nest, and tries to catch the birds frightened by the dog with his *lāldām* (a long forked wooden stick or bamboo fitted with a large net bag).

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