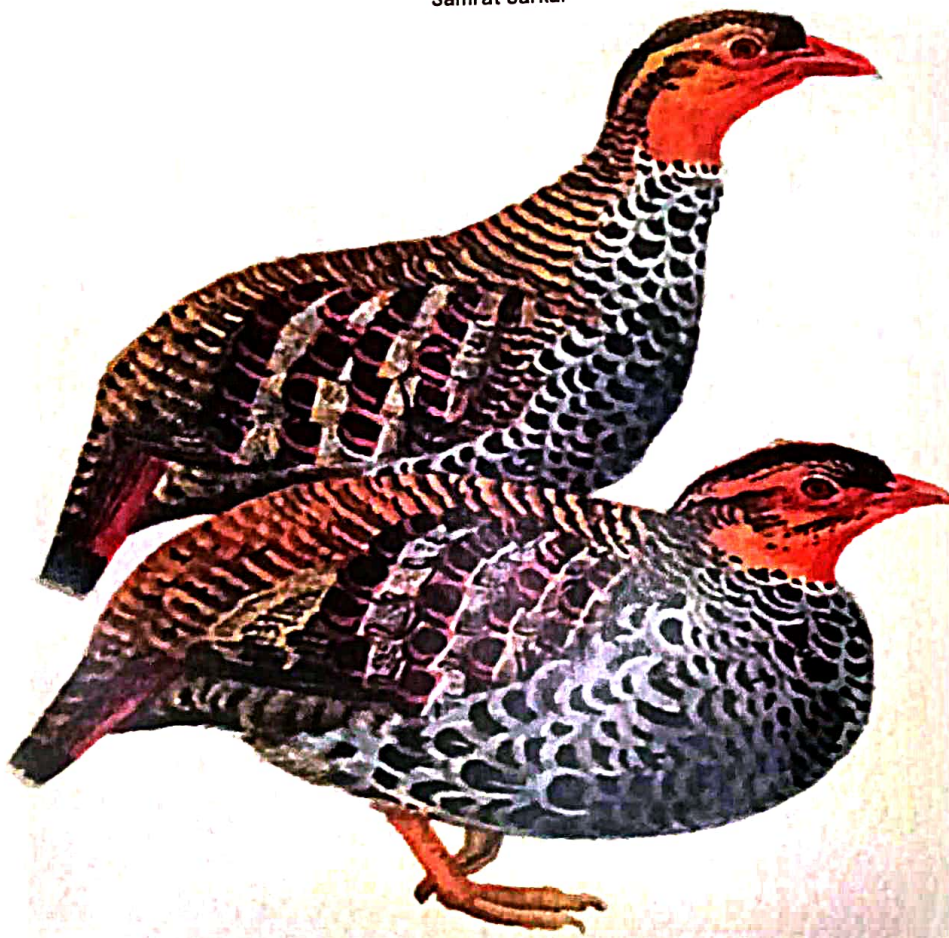




The Discovery of the Udzungwa Forest Partridge

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IT was the early days of July 1991. A team of Danish ornithologists set out on an ambitious biogeographic study of the forests nestled in Tanzania's Udzungwa Mountains. Enigmatic and evergreen, these forests are considered some of East Africa's most ecologically pristine and biodiverse regions. Among the region's remarkable discoveries are the Rufous-winged Sunbird (*Nectarinia rufipennis*), first documented in 1981 and endemic to East Africa, and the Highland Mangabey (*Lophocebus kipurji*), a primate identified in 2005 — the first of its kind described in the area since 1984.

One day, in a serendipitous encounter, the scientists came across five ground-dwelling birds, resembling francolins, wandering through the dimly lit forest floor. The birds' sturdy and peculiar appearances were unlike those of any other they had observed so far. Excited by the unusual find, the team began meticulously documenting everything about the birds: their mottled brown plumage, lurid yellow legs, red beaks, a striking white "necklace" around their throats, and behavioural quirks. Though the initial hypothesis hinted at the possibility of a new species, the team returned to Dar-es-Salaam to intently corroborate their observations with historical records, museum specimens, and previous research on African avifauna.

A few weeks later, armed with newfound insight, the team returned to the mountains — this time, to retrieve definitive proof. Capturing a specimen proved to be no easy feat, yet the objective remained clear: they needed to collect at least one specimen for a comprehensive study. The local inhabitants were unperturbed, having often caught the partridge for food and describing its meat as delectable.

The mystery surrounding it in the scientific community didn't faze them; they were used to catching the bird for food. The ornithologists, however, faced significant challenges. Setting mist nets across the dense forest entangled other rare birds, like the Tanzanian Seedeater and Mountain Robin, but the clever birds they were pursuing, seemingly aware of the nets, effortlessly avoided them. Despite numerous sightings, they evaded capture.

As time dwindled, the team reluctantly turned to native expertise. It was to be their last resort. Near Mount Mufu, villagers set traditional traps at an altitude of 1,700 metres and waited. Before long, the effort yielded a breakthrough: the first specimen was finally secured! Over the next few days, two more were captured using similar methods. While one was preserved for study at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, the other two were carefully transported in shoeboxes to Denmark. In the year that followed, the bird's presence was recorded 85 times between the altitudes of 1,350 and 2,400 metres, with a total of 246 confirmed sightings. By 1994, after years of exhaustive laboratory analysis of the specimens, the discovery of this new species was formally confirmed. Scientifically known as *Xenoperdix udzungwensis*, the identification of "Udzungwa Forest Partridge" was hailed as one of the most significant ornithological breakthroughs of the century. Its discovery sheds light on a crucial chapter in Earth's geo-biological history that deserves its own dedicated discussion.

At this point, you may wonder what a francolin or partridge-like bird looks like. In India, one might spot several