

# Western Australian Finches

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Goodwin in 1982 pointed out that the name "finch" was applied first to the Chaffinch and was derived from one of its calls. From there on it was given to many of the small seed eaters with stout bills. In common with many other bird families finches have a history of being lumped together with other finches, and becoming sub-families within the larger family, or being split into smaller families because of a myriad of differences from the perceived norm. Fortunately we don't have to wade through these differences or similarities, leaving that complicated and sometimes subjective task to those better qualified to do so.

If we divided finches (and other species) into four families we may be somewhere near the mark, but could not get anywhere near universal approval. These families are *Passeridae* - the Old World sparrows; *Ploceidae* - weavers, widowbirds and allies; *Fringillidae* - Old World finches and the *Estrildidae* - grass-finches, waxbills, mannikins and munias. This last family, which I have placed last for convenience sake, covers all the naturally occurring Australian finches plus two introduced species, Nutmeg Mannikin and Java Sparrow. Leaving the other introduced species to one side, we will concentrate on this one family, especially those found in Western Australia.

The *Estrildidae* are a large but morphologically homogeneous family of small, often brightly coloured, primarily granivorous passerines; typically with short rounded wings and rather short tails, though many species have elongated central rectrices. There are 135 - 140 species in 27 - 29 genera. They are found in Africa, Arabia, south and south-east Asia - including the Philippines and Indonesia, Australasia and islands of the South Pacific. In the HANZAB region, most species inhabit open well-grassed areas, nearly always close to water, including water-courses, swamps and marshes, waterholes, dams, bores and watering troughs. They are typically found in open to very open sclerophyll woodlands with grassy understory; or grasslands, open, grassy shrublands and rank, often riparian vegetation such as rush lands or sedge lands and sometimes in open forest with an understory of grasses as well as heath lands or heath with other shrubs. Many species have been recorded in farming land, particularly crops and usually with scattered trees or bordering shrubland. Generally uncommon or absent in urban areas. They occur from sea level to 1800 metres above sea level in Australia.

From dense rainforests in North Queensland where Blue-faced Parrot-finches are sometime found, to windswept heath lands of southern Tasmania where Beautiful Firetails can be common, and sparsely vegetated deserts of the interior where Painted and Zebra Finches are encountered; most habitats in Australia are frequented by one or more species of grassfinches, although they are more prevalent at lower latitudes. The Atlas surveys showed that Zebra Finches were easily the most widespread. The Double-barred Finch is next, but only covers half the area, followed by the Red-browed Finch. The Blue-faced Parrot-finch has the most restricted distribution - less than one percent of the mainland. The Red-eared Firetail is found only in the south-west, covering about three percent of the mainland. The Beautiful Firetail is found in six percent, with 63% of the total records coming from Tasmania where it is the only grassfinch.

Immelmann (1982) says that while most of our finches are typically found near surface water on open grasslands or savannas, there are four species that have different habitat preferences. These are: the Blue-faced Parrot-finch that frequents margins of tropical

rainforest adjoining rank grassland with scattered woody perennials; Red-eared Firetails in dense scrublands, eucalypt forests and coastal swamp lands dominated by paperbarks; Painted Finches are arid country birds that prefer rock outcrops covered by spinifex with surface water in rocky pools; and Zebra Finches, colonisers of semi-desert but with a wide range of habitats in their range. They also extend their range where forests and woodlands have been cleared or thinned for agriculture.

## **ZEBRA FINCH (*Taineopygia guttata*)**

The most widespread of Australian grassfinches, covering 75% of the mainland - absent from Cape York Peninsula, north Queensland and the forested southwest, but only comes to the coast in the central west. Found on some offshore islands, the Lesser Sundas, Indonesia and introduced to Nauru. Typically it is an "Aussie Battler" living in harsh conditions and seldom reaching old age. Indeed most finches don't live beyond five to seven years. It is Australia's most studied bird both in Australia and overseas. Probably taken for granted by most Australians but they are beautiful little birds, especially the striking male with his barred throat, chestnut cheeks and strawberry marked flanks. The juvenile is similar to, but paler than the female and has a black bill instead of the red bill of adults.

Mostly sedentary but capable of long range dispersal if conditions make it necessary. While sometimes seen in small numbers, occasionally only pairs, they can be seen in huge flocks. Breed opportunistically, but this may be when the seeds ripen even more than when it rains. The birds from the Lesser Sundas and Indonesia are smaller than the Australian birds and can be seen at a much higher altitude.

## **DOUBLE-BARRED FINCH (*Taineopygia bichenovii*)**

Marginally larger than the Zebra Finch and lacks the clear dimorphism. Although there are small differences - e.g. females have a white face and the upper throat often has a greyish tinge, slightly narrower black pectoral band. The forehead band can also be narrower but these are not always reliable. Juveniles are duller and the vermiculations are not as clear. Black bands can be faint or absent. Found in northern and eastern mainland Australia. They cover about 32% of mainland Australia and are second on the distribution list. The nominate race *bichenovii* is widespread in eastern Australia from the Gregory River south to north-eastern Victoria. *Bichenovii* differs from the NT and WA form in having a white rump, *annulosa* is black-rumped. Unusual from the other grassfinches in that its numbers seem to be increasing rather than diminishing in some areas. However the opposite is true as well. The name Owled-faced Finch sits well with this species.

## **LONG-TAILED FINCH (*Poephila acuticauda*)**

Sleek and rather slender, long-tailed with largish, flat-crowned head. Difficult to separate male and female, although the female tends to have a slightly smaller black bib with a rounded lower edge and a shorter tail. The nominate race is endemic to the Kimberley, but a few have been recorded further east, as far as Geike Gorge and Halls Creek. The most obvious difference between *acuticauda* and *hecki* is the yellow bill in the first instance and bright red in the second. *Hecki* is somewhat darker but this is a less certain method of identification.

Generally regarded as sedentary with little dispersal. Often seen with other finches, especially Masked. Nest in holes in trees, especially the northern Salmon Gum and Snappy Gum. Builds a domed nest with a long entrance tunnel. Courtship generally initiated by male, but also can be female. Females of the sub-species *hecki* more prone to make the

first move. Nests are mostly one pair per tree, although they happily accommodate other species

### **MASKED FINCH (*Poephila personata*)**

The only one of the *Poephila* genus without a black bib. Sleek and rather thickset finch with a decidedly chunky bill. Smaller than the Long-tailed Finch with a shorter tail. Sexes are difficult to tell apart. The female has a narrower bar on the flank, facial markings often more restricted and the shorter tail is brownish black. Juveniles are drabber with a black bill and greyish legs. The nominate race is found across the north from the Kimberley to the western edge of Cape York. The sub species *leucotis* is confined to Cape York. It has a smaller facial mask and a much paler cheek patch. The flank patch is smaller and duller and the bill may be paler.

Generally regarded as sedentary with little dispersal. Breeding times vary but probably mainly February - June. Often nest close to, or even on the ground under a tussock of grass or near a stump or log. Builds a big bulky nest, generally ovoid or globular. Mixes freely with both Long-tailed and Black-throated Finches. Like these species they continue to socialise while nesting; feeding, resting, drinking and bathing together.

### **CRIMSON FINCH (*Neochmia phaeton*)**

A finch that spends little time on the ground preferring to pick seeds from grass heads while clinging to grass stems - however somewhat omnivorous, eating insects and their larvae and nectar, lerps, buds and leaves. Adults are easily separated - the male is overall red with slate grey or brownish grey on the top of the head, hindneck and sides of neck. Belly and ventral area blackish. Female is like male but duller and greyer above with red confined to the face and patches of red on the wings and tail. Juveniles are very plain, mostly brown with a red wash. The two sub-species differ mainly in colour of belly: black on *phaeton* and white on *evangelinae*, which is also a slightly paler brownish-grey.

Found in riparian vegetation among eucalypt-pandanus mixes, especially where pandanus is predominant, and there is an understory of tall grass. Seen as the least social of finches, even mated pairs are somewhat distant with little allopreening, courtship feeding or roosting together. Seldom in big groups. Noted for continual tail flicking up and down, but also sideways.

### **STAR FINCH (*Neochmia ruficauda*)**

This species is divided into three sub-species which differ slightly in amount of green and extent of red face. Endemic to Australia where it was formerly widespread in the north-west, north and east but now mainly found in the Pilbara region, Kimberley division and Top End. The birds in Queensland have been recorded at scattered sites. Breeding is probably throughout most of range in Western Australia and Top End but few or none in Queensland. The reasons for the decline of the nominate race in Queensland are not known; trapping had an effect early, but the trappers went to the north-west when brighter coloured birds were found there. The overall status is near threatened globally: *subclarescens* - near threatened; *clarescens* - endangered and *ruficauda* - critically endangered. In 1995 it was estimated that there was 200,000 individuals of *subclarescens*; 5,000 *clarescens* and 50 *ruficauda*. This beautiful bird must be a source of real concern, with *ruficauda* possibly beyond help. The three disjunct sites for *subclarescens* are still reasonable but there are areas of concern as well.

## **RED-BROWED FINCH (*Neochmia temporalis*)**

Rated third in most widely distributed Australian finches and are endemic to the east coast; from Cape York right round to South Australia, coming close to Adelaide. Also found on Kangaroo Island and have been introduced to New Zealand (unsuccessfully) and some Pacific Islands including Tahiti. First discovered in Western Australia by John Dell around 1962 in Helena Valley - he thought that they may have been there for a few years. They became locally common during the 1950s to 1980s, but since then numbers have declined possibly due to changes in the management of orchards and the mowing of grasses. They were also building in numbers in Gooseberry Hill but after a major fire their numbers declined. However they are still to be found in private orchards in the Pickering Brook area.

Zann (1996) notes that these finches occur in the widest variety of habitats. From sea level to about 1750 metres in the subalpine zone. They are found in eucalyptus forests, woodlands, rainforests (especially in margins or clearings), moist shrublands, riparian vegetation, coastal or plateau heathlands, farmland, orchards, gardens and urban parklands. One of the few finches that go into clearings in pine plantations and have also been recorded in mangroves.

## **RED-EARED FIRETAIL (*Stagonopleura oculata*)**

The only naturally occurring finch in the south-west. A small but sturdy finch that favours dense riparian vegetation, especially dense shrubs within eucalypt forests, but also in melaleuca swamps and dense heathland. Mostly found in south coastal and subcoastal areas. Occasionally in, or close to, the Swan Coastal Plain. Certainly found in the foothills of the Darling Scarp. Adversely affected by clearing of jarrah forests, and replacing them with pine plantations.

Regarded as sedentary, but movements possibly associated with fires comes from the Helena Valley. Not found in flocks; mostly ones, twos and a few threes. Observation indicates that the strong pair-bond is maintained until the death of one partner. Pair formation can occur before full adult plumage is reached. A breeding territory ranges from 100 - 200 metres out from the nest and nests are more than 100 metres apart. Tend to feed perched, pulling seeding grass inwards and feeding with the stem grasped in a foot. When feeding on the ground the bird stops regularly and climbs to a vantage point where it can look around before resuming feeding.

## **PAINTED FINCH (*Emblema pictum*)**

An arid area finch. Both the generic and specific names describe the bird perfectly: *Emblema* - mosaic or inlaid work and *picta* - painted. A truly stunning bird as it hops or flies swiftly and low over its rocky, spinifex covered habitat. Most often found on rocky hillsides with water close at hand. The male has more red than the female, especially around the face. Both birds have a variegated bill - the upper mandible black with a red tip and the lower red with narrow pale blue base. Juvenile bill is blackish with a pinkish patch near the base of the lower mandible.

Generally found in pairs or small flocks (up to 20). Can sometimes be seen in large numbers at water, along with other finches and honeyeaters. They are endemic to Australia and are widespread in the Gascoyne and Pilbara regions; more scattered in the south and occasionally east Kimberley but can always be found at the Mary River crossing between Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek and around Caroline Pool between Halls Creek and the old townsite. Said to have extended their range in the north-west. Generally sedentary, but irruptions occur very occasionally during unusually wet seasons. Feed on

the ground, searching among rocks and spinifex for fallen seed. Nests in spinifex in a loose, bottle shaped or domed nest.

### **GOULDIAN FINCH (*Erythrura gouldiae*)**

After a period where it was feared this lovely finch was becoming critically endangered it seems they are making a strong comeback over much of their range. The classification has gone from endangered to near threatened. Two of the key elements in the earlier crash were the rather indiscriminate burning regimes and the high number of nests being abandoned. The effect trapping has on numbers is harder to define. Regarded as a single species with no sub-species in spite of their being three distinct face colours – black, red and golden-headed. The black is the most numerous (up to 67% of the total according to one record), followed by the red (around 30%), leaving just over 2% of yellow-faced birds. These latter birds are more yellow-orange than golden. The sexes are easy to separate with the males in brilliant “gloss” colours and the females a more subdued “matt” toning. Young are a somewhat non-descript green. They build a nest deep in small hollows in *Eucalyptus tintinnans* or *Eucalyptus brevifolia*. Nestlings and fledglings have luminous gape tubercles, in common with parrot-finches and manikins. These are pea-sized in nestlings, reducing as the bird grows older.

### **YELLOW-RUMPED MANNIKIN (*Lonchura flaviprymna*)**

Described as a rather non-descript, stocky and large-headed finch, with a large, thick bill, full chest and short wings. Very similar in size and shape to the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, with whom they often hybridise where their ranges overlap. Can be confused with a juvenile Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, but only if you ignore the very pale head of the Yellow-rumped Mannikin. Juveniles are difficult to separate. Endemic to north Australia and found only in the Kimberley in WA, mainly round Kununurra and the west Top End. They have benefited from the establishment of agriculture, especially the Ord River irrigation scheme. May be somewhat affected by riverine degradation caused by stock.

Generally sedentary in the Kimberley but move coastwards in the dry season elsewhere. Highly social, often seen in groups of about 20 and up to 100 on the Ord. Mingle freely with Chestnut-breasted Mannikins – where they feed, bathe and roost together.

### **CHESTNUT-BREASTED MANNIKIN (*Lonchura castaneothorax*)**

Found in northern and eastern Australia from the Kimberley division east to North Queensland, and south to the Illawarra region of New South Wales. Also found in the New Guinea lowlands, introduced to Vanuatu, New Caledonia and the Society and Marquesa Islands. Feral group round Perth! Many were trapped for the avicultural trade, which has probably caused local extinctions in some areas, e.g. Dampier Peninsula. Possibly affected by the introduction of the Nutmeg Mannikin in the east. Have benefited greatly from the establishment of pasture, irrigation and grain crops.

Regarded as resident in many areas with some movement towards the coast in others as well as irregular movement in others. Birds of rank grasslands, reed beds near swamps, creek, rivers or estuarine mudflats and mangroves. Have colonised man-made habitats, especially sugarcane and rice fields. Often seen with Yellow-rumped and Nutmeg Mannikins.

## **PICTORELLA MANNIKIN (*Heteromunia pectoralis*)**

Endemic to northern Australia; in Western Australia largely found in the Kimberley and occasionally north Pilbara, Northern Territory mainly found in the Top End but patchily distributed and found near Darwin on occasions. Widespread in the Victoria River drainage basin and north Tanami desert. Recorded in the gulf country and west-central regions in Queensland. Difficult to pinpoint populations because of both nomadic and regular seasonal movements. They can be widely scattered during wet seasons and throughout their range and move coastwards during droughts.

Immelman (1982) notes that Pictorella Mannikins seem to be far less social than Chestnut-breasted and Yellow-rumped Mannikins and don't clump together or allopreen. In non-breeding season can form flocks of up to 200 birds, but flock coherence doesn't seem to be strong. Will associate with other mannikins but even then tend to separate themselves. Like the Gouldians, seem to be more wary of human interaction than most other finches. Keep clear of buildings and often fly first when humans approach.

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