

Crimson Finch

(Neochmia phaeton)

by Drew Smith Myponga, South Australia

he Crimson Finch is an average to small sized Australian grass finch. In body it is a reasonably sleek bird; however, the long tail feathers give an overall longer length than other Australian finches. They are closely related to the Star Finch or Red-faced Finch (Neochmia ruficauda) and bear obvious similarities. The overall average length of the Crimson Finch is 140 mm (5.5 inches) with the tail being only marginally less than half of this. The male bird has a red bill, face, and ear coverts with the red extending down the throat, breast and flanks. Along the flanks close to the edge of the rested wing are a number of white spots. The belly through to the undertail coverts is black. The tail is a dull crimson on the upper surface with a more fawn undersurface. The upper tail coverts and rump are crimson with the wings being fawn with a strong crimson wash in adults. The back, nape and crown are a gray to almost black on the forehead/crown region. The gray nape almost forms a collar to the throat. The iris is yellowish and the legs are either flesh colored or yellow, depending on race.

The female bird exhibits the same degree of red in the face and side of head with a red bill although slightly duller than the male and has a dull red brown tail and only a very slight or weak red wash suffusion of the back and wing coverts. The remaining portion of feather color is a grayish fawn, slightly paler on the undersurface. The white spots on the flanks are also exhibited. The female is slightly narrower across the forehead than the male, this being a significant means for sexing immature birds. Juveniles have no distinct red feathering and have a black bill. Western birds are a

darker brown and males of this race only do exhibit a slight red wash suffusion in the back and wing areas. (This is elaborated upon at a later stage of this article.) The white flank spots are also absent until just prior to coloring.

Distribution

These grass finches live in the far northern and northeastern edge of Australia from the Kimberley region in the north, west to the east coast then south to the Tropic of Capricorn. They are, therefore, birds of tropical and semitropical climate and inhabit particularly the lush growth along watercourses and lush, tall, grassy glades. They are also reported to live in areas of cleared land close to human habitation where they may nest in and around buildings.

The Crimson Finch (*Neochmia phaeton*) or the Blood Finch, is a colloquial name that may suggest a subspecies, but is certainly descriptive of the eastern and western extremes in the species.

Having kept and bred many of these magnificent finches over many years, I have noted differences in both behavior and, more particularly, color due to, I believe, geographic variation. I purchased a young semi-colored pair of Crimson Finches in early 1979. These were the progeny of birds bred from a parentage of Queenslandorigin birds before the introduction of wild-caught specimens from the Western Australian Kimberley region. The immature male was colored only as high as the lower chest, upper abdomen area, the upper half remaining fawn with a dull reddish bill. Eventually, the male attained adult plumage, crimson underside, black abdomen and undertail coverts, red tail and bill, brown wings heavily washed with crimson, crimson face with gray crown and nape and flesh colored legs. The bird remained this way without change. The white flank spots were evident at all times from purchasing, i.e., on the fawn coloring through to adult plumage.

The female, similarly, already with white spots and possessing a crimson tail, attained adult plumage with crimson face coloring and a light crimson wash coloration of the light brown wing coverts. The bill also became a dull crimson red. The legs were also flesh colored.

This pair was housed in a planted aviary, with Neophema parrots. This was 15' x 5' x 7' and contained two large clumps of Johnson grass, New Guinea palm grass, two medium shrubs and broom brush on the half shelter division and wire netting sides. Elegant Parrots were later added and a log hung out of the shelter under a cover and was positioned with the top surface approximately 45 inches below the roof. This gap was the site chosen by the Crimson Finches for their nest. After a couple of unsuccessful "learning" attempts at producing young, these birds eventually produced three young from this flattishshaped grass nest lined with white and gray feathers. The three young with dark bills were uniform gray brown and showed no red/crimson pigmentation. All three appeared visually identical.

Upon catching up these young when independent, they still had no red or red wash in the plumage. It was noted while in the hand, that two birds had smaller heads, narrower across the forehead approximately between the eyes when viewed from

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above. The other bird's head appeared slightly heavier and broader. The bill also may have been slightly heavier but certainly not distinct. It was, therefore, supposed that these three young were one cock and two hens, coincidentally the required sex ratio. Eventually, these three birds (bred on 25/12/79) attained full adult plumage and proved to be two females and one male, showing that skull measurements were an effective means of sexing an immature Crimson Finch of eastern origin.

The breeding pair was later given to the owner of the three young in an attempt at establishing a larger colony. Unfortunately, these birds and young eventually died out.

In January 1985, a pair of Blood Finches was again purchased. These birds were in adult plumage and were of a Western Australian origin imported with other Western Australian finches wild caught. I use the colloquial name of Blood Finch here as it is descriptive of coloration as opposed to a definite crimson color of the eastern form. These western birds were a rich blood red, particularly in the full coloring of the male, with black abdomen, red tail, red wing coverts and face. The male had a dark charcoal, almost black, crown and dark gray nape. The legs were a distinctive yellowish, as opposed to the flesh colored eastern bird's legs. I feel the bill also was brighter and deeper in color. Of course, both birds exhibited white flank spots, which were possibly slightly more distinct on the male western than male eastern due to a deeper red background color. The female western bird may have exhibited slightly redder wing and tail pigment.

This pair was housed in an aviary 20' x 5' x 8' together with a very successful pair of Mulga Parrots (Psephotus varius). The aviary was quite heavily planted, having a large Cytissus racemosus (African Yellow Broom), Baumea juncus (Sedge Grass), Nandina domestica (Japanese sacred bamboo) and Johnson grass. Needlebrush Hakea was placed in the shelter area for nesting: this is now clearly not necessary for this species. The parrots, while initially chewing heavily on the foliage, eventually

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stabilized and kept the bushes compact but allowing them to grow quite healthily. The finches benefitted greatly from the fresh greenery of the aviary and settled quickly without any disturbance from the Mulga Parrots.

By the following season, the Blood Finches had selected a site in the forks of the hanging needlebrush, low down where only thick trunk branches existed. Here they wedged their nest in hard against a partition to the adjoining aviary, the foliage of the needlebrush offering no cover or protection. This nest was sparsely lined with white feathers, was more globular in shape due to the situation, and had a slight canopy over the entry that tilted downward — however, the sitting female could still be viewed.

The female sat very lightly during the earlier stages of incubation, leaving the nest on my approach to enter the aviary. After approximately 15 days incubation, five young were hatched and left the nest between 14 and 18 days later. All left by 11th December 1986. This pair had a later nesting, re-using the first nest after a slight clean and tidy of the structure and on 9th February 1987, our normally hottest month, two more young fledged. During these breedings, the birds were supplied an insectivorous mixture made of finely grated plain cake, boiled egg yolk and cheese, a small amount of fly pupae, mealworms, moths and sparingly with white ants. The insectivor mix was eagerly sought together with the insects and base finch seed diet.

These young with black bills were dark brown in color, noticeably darker than the young of the eastern origin birds, more of a chocolate as opposed to gray brown. A most obvious and important difference exhibited was a distinct red wash in the back and wing feathers of the western juvenile males; the tail also showed this red wash. The only obvious difference between eastern and western females was the darker brown color of the western. As with the eastern birds, there was a difference in skull size related to the sex, the male birds having a slightly larger head; however, the red wash on the upper surface of the male differentiated it significantly from the females of the same nest.

Crimson or Blood Finches tend to spend a lot of their day fossicking low in the aviary through bush and grasses, and remain quiet while doing so. If, during this activity, birds fly swiftly low over the aviary or human presence is suddenly made obvious, all birds will quickly rise to various vantage points, uttering an excited and rapid succession of penetrating twi-twi-twi alarm calls. The courtship song is seldom heard and is a quiet, raspy trill from the puffed-out male sitting with half open bill. These birds also greatly enjoy the opportunity to bathe in fresh water and if this were given every five minutes I am sure the birds would bathe every five minutes.

These birds tend to strongly protect their territory, particularly within close proximity (i.e. one or two meters) of the nest. This can produce an aggressive nature in some birds but certainly this is an individual or perhaps also a geographical variation trait as some birds, noticeably from the eastern form, and individuals, are much quieter or more tolerant towards other species. If the adult male begins consistently chasing young birds from perches while uttering a harsh rasping note, these young should be moved from the aviary, preferably to an adjoining planted aviary — these will also most likely prove to be immature males. Whenever trying to visually sex these birds, if you feel you are splitting hairs, then most likely you have birds of the same sex. Of course, familiarization and practice creates a trained eye.

Some pairs will be more productive than others and for this reason, more than one pair of variable bloodlines should be maintained. These birds are not necessarily easy to breed in captivity and can, in fact, be quite difficult: they are not as common as many other Australian Finches living in small groups and are definitely not common in captivity. Once their behavior and requirements are understood, then suitable housing and management can be developed. I would be reluctant to recommend housing in a communal aviary situation with other finches because I believe better results can be achieved in parrot-style housing situations. To keep these birds places an onus upon the owner to procreate the species, particularly in view of the poor status of the bird in captivity.

In housing the species in parrotstyle aviaries, there should be a variety of grasses, including some of the taller species of sedge. These provide food and a lush shelter which is most desirable. These finches can be quite successfully housed and bred with several genera of parrots, such as *neophemas*, *psephotus*, *polytelis*, etc., but particularly those parrots which will stabilize in a planted environment without destroying and denuding the aviary of all greenery of consequence. In such a situation, there should be no detriment to either species.

It has been mentioned, on occasions, that Crimson Finches sometimes block nesting parrots in the log to starve, by building their grass nest higher in the log. I have not encountered anything to this effect due to birds desiring a more airy spot, although crammed, to nest-build. Daily observation will quickly overcome any such problem by revealing any chosen site for nest-building as birds fly to and from the site with fine grass and small white feathers.

In finishing up on the subject, the key word for this species of northern Australian Finch is *management* and *not* its collectability. Most of us, having obtained the birds, will surely breed them.

Maintaining a viable population in captivity is definitely the real challenge, as it seems almost inevitable that a population will dwindle after initial explosion — perhaps due to the lack of continued effort by the owner after having successfully bred the birds. Management practices need constant re-examination.

• First, more than one pair should be established.

• Suitable housing and dietary practices, as previously mentioned.

• Retention of young birds and acquisition of new *young* for future breeding pairs — I feel that adult pairs may have a relatively short productive breeding life.

• Introduction to aviaries or movement of excess birds at suitable times to allow acclimatization — birds preferring and benefitting from warm, sheltered, sunny positions.

• Rodent-proof environments: 3/8" bird-wire being a particularly effective means of housing birds.

These notes are from personal experience and observation and may be contradictory in other cases. They should, however, prove useful in helping the successful establishment of the Crimson or Blood Finch. \bullet