

Crimson Finch

FAMILY: *Estreldidae*

GENUS: *Neochima*

SPECIES: *phaeton*

OTHER NAMES: Australian Firefinch, Blood Finch, Cape York Crimson Finch, Crimson, Pale Crimson Finch, Pheasant-tailed Finch, White-bellied Crimson Finch.

Description:

Medium sized finch with striking crimson body plumage. Males body plumage is crimson with back and upper wing coverts olive-grey. Flanks crimson with white spots. Belly and undertail coverts black, eyes brown, legs yellow-brown and bill crimson.

Females are Olive-brown above, pale brown below with dull crimson upper tail coverts and tail. Her bill is black. Immature birds resemble females, but are pale brown below and grey-brown above with a black bill.

This finch is rather aggressive and antisocial and rarely forms flocks. Rather, it is usually encountered in pairs or small parties which constantly squabble amongst themselves. Indeed, these birds are so pugnacious that much larger birds have been noted to be driven away from nesting sites.

Crimson Finches feed close to the ground but are seldom seen on the ground. Instead, they prefer to cling to the tops of tall grasses.

Length: 140mm.

Subspecies:

Aviculturalists recognise the following subspecies: *N. p. albiventer* (white-bellied form) and *N. p. evangelinae*, however these are formally recognised as races.

Distribution:

Northern Australia from around Derby (WA) around the south-eastern corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria north to the Aurukun Mission on Cape York Peninsula. and on the east coast from Port Douglas south to Mackay.

Habitat:

Formerly, the Crimson Finch was found only in dense grasslands near water in tropical woodlands. Now it is also found in canefields and pineapple plantations.

Diet:

Ripe and half-ripe seeds of grasses.

In captivity, a good quality finch seed mix is the mainstay of the diet. This should be supplemented with greenfood (eg half ripened seed heads of grasses or most other herbs from the garden such as Shepherd's Purse, Dandelion and Chickweed, or any vegetables such as silverbeet, lettuce, etc.).

Many aviculturalists provide live food (often mealworms) during the breeding season

although others have had good results without it. Lastly, it is important to provide birds with ample grit (fine) and perhaps cuttle-fish where possible.

Breeding:

January-April in the north and September-May in the south of its distribution. The nest is usually located in a Pandanus palm, constructed of bark, leaves and grass and lined with feathers. The nest is dome shaped, approx. 150mm in diameter and lacks an entrance tunnel. The male alone collects the nest material, but both sexes are involved in constructing the nest, incubating the eggs and rearing the young.

In captivity Crimson Finches will accept a variety of nesting receptacles ranging from woven baskets and boxes to dry brush.

Courtship Display:

Courtship display is quite elaborate in this species (as is the case for many of the grassfinches). The male takes a length of grass in his bill and ruffles his feathers before adopting a horizontal position beside the female who also assumes this posture. In this position, both birds keep their heads and tails pointed toward one another. Next, the male begins a bobbing dance and sings. This dance continues until the male mounts the female.

Sexual Maturity:

Becomes sexually mature at the age of about 9 months, but most birds are most productive from their second year onwards.

Clutch:

5-8 white eggs (14mm x 12mm). Incubation period: 12-14 days. The young usually fledge at around 21 days. Independent young should not be removed from the parents until about 4 weeks after fledging.

Mutations and Hybrids:

The only known colour mutation is a Yellow (or Golden). This mutation occurs naturally in the wild and is manifested in a range of colour variations from deep yellow to a rusty colour.

Suitable Aviaries and Compatible Birds

Crimson Finches will be quite happy in suspended cages or breeding cabinets. These should have at least the following dimensions: 700mm(long) x 400mm x 400mm. Owing to the aggressive nature of these birds, many advocate that they are best kept in breeding pairs in small cages or aviaries. However, a number of aviculturalists have had breeding success when these birds are kept in a finch colony.

Species Specific Problems

This species tends to be prone to Coccidiosis, Roundworm and gastroenteritis