

Star Finch

FAMILY: *Estrildidae*

GENUS: *Neochema*

SPECIES: *ruficauda*

OTHER NAMES: Red-faced Finch, Red-faced Firetail, Red-tailed Finch, Rufous-tailed Finch, Ruficauda Finch.

Description:

Medium finch with striking plumage. Upper parts olive-yellow and underparts yellowish. Breast olive grey with white spots. Front half of head crimson. Face and chin crimson with white spots. Beak crimson, legs and feet yellow, eyes red-olive. Females resemble males but are generally duller and have less crimson on the face. Immature birds are olive brown above and pale olive below. The head and face are grey.

The Star Finch is usually encountered in small wandering groups when not breeding. They feed mostly near the ground, preferring to cling to the seedheads of grasses rather than land on the ground. Pairs form very strong bonds and remain in close contact.

Length: 110-120mm.

Subspecies:

No formally recognised subspecies. Aviculturalists recognise two subspecies: namely *N. r. ruficauda* (n nominate) and *N.r. clarescens*. The latter is found across northern and north-western Australia and differs from the nominate form in that the red colouration is significantly more extensive and brighter. Most of the specimens held in aviaries are of the sub-species.

Status:

In the wild - questionable - probably endangered **In aviculture** -

Distribution:

Formerly across northern Australia from Shark Bay to Northern NSW. Today it is reliably reported from west of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Habitat:

Riparian vegetation in temperate to tropical swamps and woodland.

Diet:

Ripe and half ripe grass seeds. At the commencement of the breeding season insects (esp. flying termites) predominate.

Breeding:

Generally March-April.

The nest is usually located in a bush or shrub up to several metres above ground. The nest is globular about 150mm in diameter and lacks an entrance tunnel. It is constructed from dead grass and lined with feathers.

The selection of a nest site involves an elaborate ceremony. Both sexes sit on the site of the

future nest and simultaneously bow deeply with tails twisted. This is followed by pivoting around the perch. Both the parents incubate the eggs and rear the young.

In captivity Star Finches prefer to nest in bundles of brush rather than other receptacles. Because they like to nest close to the ground, and preferably in a grass tussock, it would be advantageous to provide these (or some sort of artificial substitute) for nesting. To avoid problems with exposure, Star Finches should be encouraged to nest in a sheltered section of the aviary.

Star Finches require plenty of half-ripe seed heads, sprouted seeds and live food to be encouraged to nest.

Courtship Display:

Like the crimson Finch, the Star Finch performs a song and dance whilst holding a grass stem (or similar token) in his bill. The feathers on the head breast and flanks are ruffed and the tail twisted toward the female. This is accompanied by a great deal of bobbing.

Sexual Maturity:

Maturity is attained at about 12 months, but these birds are most productive after their second year and continue to be so until about their fifth year.

Clutch:

3-6 pure white eggs (15mm x 11mm). Incubation period: 12-14 days. The young usually fledge at around 15-17 days. Fledged birds should not be removed from the parents until at least 4 weeks after fledging.

In captivity, Star Finches may produce as many as three broods per year.

Mutations and Hybrids:

This species is known to have produced hybrids with the Red-cheeked Cordon-bleu and Red-billed Firefinch. Hybrids with the Zebra and Crimson Finches have also been reported. Mutations include Yellow, Fawn, Cinnamon and Pied.

Suitable Aviaries and Compatible Birds

For breeding purposes Star 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. These birds are at their best in larger planted aviaries. Such an aviary should provide plenty of shelter and should probably have a roof over at least half its area. It should be noted however that large numbers of these birds will destroy most aviary plants. Star finches will readily share an aviary with most other small seed eaters (eg. zebra, painted, parrot, etc etc) including doves and quail. During the breeding season they may become somewhat pugnacious but their disposition is satisfactory overall.

Species Specific Problems

These birds spend a lot of time on the ground and are therefore susceptible to worms and Coccidia