

My Experiences with The Lesser Red-browed Finch

Neochmia temporalis minor

By Gregory Parker

Introduction

Whilst not an expert finch breeder yet, I have gained enough experience and information to enable regular breeding of this finch (clutches of 5 are becoming more common). It is not widely kept in Australian aviaries, perhaps due to its cost and perceived difficulty of breeding. It is in my opinion that the Lesser Red-brow is easier to breed than the nominate race.



Lesser Red Brow (cock)

Description

The Lesser Red-brow is a smaller and lighter bird than the nominate form. The mantle, back and upper wing coverts are a very bright olive-yellow colour. There is a very clear delineation of the olive-yellow mantle on the back of the neck without the “collar” of colour. All the red markings are a vivid scarlet colour. The body and abdomen are a greyish-white. Within my birds, there are some variations in body colour, with some being almost white under the mandible and chin.

Sexing in this sub-species is relatively easy, compared to the nominate form. (see photo)

Male - (right) as described above, the under tail coverts and tail are black.

Female- (left) slightly smaller and duller in crimson on the brow and rump. Under tail coverts are grey.



Sexing Lesser Red Browns by tail coverts

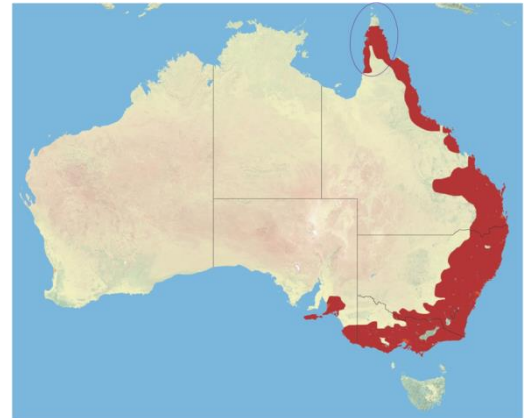
Historical Description

The nominate form, *Neochmia temporalis*, was described by J Latham in 1801. The Lesser Red-brow (*Neochmia temporalis minor*) was first described by A.J Campbell one hundred years latter in 1901, from a single skin, in the Adelaide Museum collection, taken from Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. Ornithologist, Gregory Mathews, added further Red-brow variants in his writings between 1913 and 1925. These included “*macgillivrayi*” (Claudie River specimen). The Claudie River specimen was described as having a “black tail and under tail coverts”. It is interesting to note that the Claudie River area is in the home range of the Lesser Red-brow and the male of this subspecies has a black tail and under tail coverts. It is highly likely that Campbell was describing a male Lesser Red-brow. Immelman in his book, *Australian Finches in Bush and Aviary*, confirms this by suggesting that “*macgillivrayi*” is a synonym for “*minor*”. Mathews other described variants were also dismissed as synonyms for *temporalis*.

Whilst minor tonal variations in colour and size (geographic forms) occur within the Red-browed Finch's range from north to south, the recent appearance of a purportedly new sub-species "Macgillivray" in aviculture is curious. The spelling of this sub-species is also interesting (incorrect). Kingston comments that these birds are basically an intergrade of the Lesser and the nominate form in appearance. The name "Macgillivray" should therefore not be used in describing this intergrade bird as a sub-species as discussed above from a historical and nomenclature perspective.

Distribution and Habitat

I have never seen the Lesser Red-brow in the wild, but hope to in the near future. Their distribution is described as sporadic on the Cape York Peninsula. They range from Cooktown in the south to the vicinity of Weipa in the north, where they are found on both sides of the Cape. Their habitat is also variable. They are usually confined to gullies and watercourses, where dense vegetation occurs and feed in adjacent dry woodland areas that predominate.



Lesser Red Brow distribution (approximately)

Housing

I started breeding finches as a teen in a typical box aviary with a mixed collection of finches with all its pro's and con's. Once through University, I purchased a property and constructed an advanced aviary and learned more about the husbandry of finches, breeding large numbers of Red Faced Parrot Finches and Strawberry Finches. It was during this time that I met David Myers who introduced me to the Lesser Red-brow. This aviary, eventually made way for a garage. As time passed, I designed my current aviary complex reflecting my local environment, combined with inspiration from a visit to a STGF open day (thank you Mike Fidler) and other aviary designs.



Aviary Complex constructed of refrigeration panels

The aviaries are constructed from commercial refrigeration panels. Included are 7 breeding flights, a birdroom and 8 breeding cages. Another smaller holding aviary contains 3 flights for the young. The aviaries are 1.2m-1.8m x 2.4m with a 1.5m x 1.5 suspended flights. The reason for a suspended flight is to deter snakes, rats/mice, goannas, possums and any other local animals from threatening the birds and to provide a dry unsoil flight throughout the year. The suspended flights are roofed with clear polycarbonate. Recently I have reduced the roofing on the suspended flights to allow more direct sunlight and rain. The rain passes through to ground below without



Bird Room and kitchenette

creating damp floors. It is interesting to see the birds basking in natural sunlight and bathing in showers of rain. To date I have only had some black ants invade the aviaries.

The bird room contains 8 breeding cages and a kitchenette with storage. The cages in the birdroom are 1.2m x 1.2m x 1.2m, with a suspended flight of 0.6m x 1.2m attached. The birds that have been bred in these cages include Yellow-winged Pyillias, Orange-breasts, Cordons, Gouldians and Painteds. I may try to bred the Lessers in such a cage in the future.

The Lesser Red-brows are housed in aviaries with 1 pair per flight. They are housed with Painteds, Yellow-rumps or Pictorellas. I feel it is important not to house Lessers with any aggressive or dominate breeds that may produce competition due to their small size and quite nature. All flights contain automated water, seed hoppers, LED daylight spectrum lights and a skylight to allow filtered light into the aviary. Natural light is gained via the suspended flights.

Breeding

During the few last season, I adopted a cycled method of regulating breeding for all my finches with improved breeding results. I do not use an Austerity System as such, but rather a Cycling System of significantly reduced calories which still includes essential nutritional elements, at certain times of the year. In this way the birds are not deprived in essential elements in their diet to keep them healthy. In the past, I have had Lessers breeding at almost any time of the year, but more commonly in the warmer months. Now I determine when my birds breed by varying the diet, photoperiod, and when I pair the birds together. This also mimicks natural cycles. I am convinced that this is a better way to control breeding and improve the health and longevity of my birds. So now the breeding season is from September to April. I also separate the sexes in the non-breeding season.

The male has a song like a low frequency variable “flowing water” sound. It is quite distinctive and beautiful. In courtship, the male often uses a grass token whilst singing, bowing, and hopping with the tail diverted toward the female. The male may also adopt an upright posture with the beak pointed toward the sky, singing and hopping up and down. Nest building starts soon after mating.

I provide baskets of brush and bracken fern at varying heights in the aviary. I also include the usual cane baskets and wire cylinders. The Lesser Red-brow has a tendency to build its own nest, but I have also found an increasing number of pairs nesting in wire cylinders and even cane baskets. The nesting site is always high up in the aviary; it can be quite large with the nesting chamber lined with fine grasses and feathers.

Three to six eggs are laid with an incubation period of around 13-14 days. Both parents share incubation and feeding duties.

The young fledge around 20 to 22 days after hatching. Clutches of 3 are most common with up to 5 occurring with more frequency.

The young colour up remarkably quickly in around 12 weeks. Some slower colouring males show characteristics of females but gradually their under tail coverts turn black.



Two newly fledged “Lessers”

Feeding

My comments below relate to the breeding diet. In this last season I utilised a cycled breeding system as mentioned above. The Lesser Red-brow is generally not a fussy bird and I have developed a diet that works very well.

I supply a basic quality finch mix mixed with a small amount of hemp oil and a balancing supplement (TummyRite with calcium). Hard dry seed is used in aviculture for convenience but is not a balanced staple food for my birds. The mix ensures a more balanced diet during all stages of my cycled feeding system. During breeding I also supply lebanese cucumber, maggots, microgreens (red clover) and a soft food. When Lessers have young, the Lebanese cucumber is eaten down to



Microgreens (Red Clover) are feed to the birds during breeding

the skin and maggot consumption increases.

The soft food mix includes “chitted/sprouted” seed, “Greens n Grains seed mix”, and a balanced breeding supplement (Propserity). In the build up stage to breeding I also add extra calcium (CalciRite) to this soft food mix. The calcium demands during egg production and laying are significant! I have found that using these supplements is simple and has boosted breeding results and the general health of all my birds

significantly. There has been no episodes of egg binding or gut problems in the past 12 months using the diet and cycling system. Like any new diet there is a small transition period.



Soft Food mix is fed on trays

Tank water is supplied after being passing through a micro filter and UV sterilizer. Water is dispersed via a timing system of solenoids twice per day.

A basic solouble grit mixture (includes Calcirite) is also provided for the birds.

Health

In general, I have found the Lesser Red-brow to be quite hardy, but prone to the diseases of most finches. These are usually caused by nutritional deficiency, poor husbandry and poor hygiene. I have noted that feather plucking is an issue in some pairs. The use of a cycling system and new feeding protocols appears to have reduced this phenomenon. My oldest bird is 4.5 years old, so they appear not to be long livers. My aviaries do not allow the possibility for damp floors or drafts but the temperature on winter nights drops to 2-3 degrees Celsius quite often. The use of roosting nests helps the birds survive our moderate winters well.

Regular worming and coccidiosis treatments are employed throughout the year.

Mutations

No mutations of the Lesser Red-brow are known. However, it is only a matter of time before a genetic colour fault is produced as in the nominate race. I did breed an interesting individual that was silver with a vivid golden back. It survived for 9 months.

Conclusion

The Lesser Red-brow is a stunning looking finch and is highly recommended for breeders with some experience. Once housed in protected, dry, draft proof flights, without competition, with good husbandry and supplied with a balanced cycled diet, the birds thrive.

If there are any breeders out there who believe they have bloodlines unrelated to mine please contact the editor for correspondence with me.

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