

Recent record of Plum-headed Finch on Cooper Creek in the north-east of South Australia

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On 10 July 2011, four Plum-headed Finches, *Neochmia modesta*, were observed and photographed ~11.8 km west of the Queensland border in the Innamincka Regional Reserve, near the eastern end of Cullyamurra Waterhole on the main channel of Cooper Creek, ~20 km east of Innamincka.

Initially, two 'sparrow-like' birds were seen to flush from a patch of Mitchell Grass (*Astrelba* sp.) ~10m from the track and settle in view in a nearby Lignum (see Fig. 1) around 30 m distant and were immediately identified using binoculars. Shortly after, despite the arrival of a second vehicle, the two finches flew diagonally closer, returning to the nearby patch of seeding grasses where they were joined by two others. Two were full-coloured males (Fig. 2) and at least one of the others was a female (distinct light eye-brow and no throat patch). Observation of feeding behaviours continued over about eight minutes, undisturbed by two observers with camera equipment who were able to move slowly to < 5 m from the birds. The location was subsequently visited by DENR ranger staff and other observers from Birds SA during July 2011, with sightings of up to 13 individuals reported (T. Whibley pers comm.; C. Rogers in litt.).

Normally found west of the Great Dividing Range across central Queensland and northern NSW, the Plum-headed Finch is typically described in field guides as 'locally nomadic, irruptive' etc. and Immelmann (1965) describes a somewhat nomadic 'way of life' for the species. He links their distribution to "the immediate vicinity of watercourses, to which it comes to drink at least every hour" . . . "in dry seasons

it may leave a certain area and remain absent for several years, while in a specially wet year it may appear in large numbers where it had not been seen for many years". Immelmann has indirectly highlighted this and similar species potential to follow exceptional rainfall and flood events, when vast areas of seeding grasses occur coincident with abundant surface water across outback areas of central and western Queensland and New South Wales, including, as confirmed here, into the Cooper Basin.

Other outlying distribution records for this species from western and south-western Queensland include: from near Boulia (Higgins, Peter and Cowling 2006, Vol. 7 Part B, pp. 1188–1196), which is on the Bourke River and part of the Georgina River catchment, ~540 km distant NNW from the Cullyamurra sighting; near Gumhole Camp in Diamantina National Park in July 2000 (A. Ley pers comm.), ~450 km N of the Cullyamurra sighting; and ~40 birds near Thargomindah in late May 2007 (J. Forshaw in litt.), on the Bulloo River, ~290 km ESE of the Cullyamurra sighting.

When these far-flung records are added to the recent Cullyamurra record it would appear that the elusive Plum-headed Finch should be recognised as another successful opportunist species, well-adapted to take advantage of the 'boom and bust' seasonal cycles which are a constant environmental feature of the centre of the continent.

REFERENCES

- Higgins, P. J., Peter, J. M. and Cowling, S. J. (Eds) (2006). *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 7 (Part B), Dunnock to Starlings*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Immelmann, K. (1965). *Australian Finches*. Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

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Figure 1. The general view of the habitat where the Plum-headed Finch were seen adjacent to Cullyamurra Waterhole with the patch of seeding Mitchell Grass in the foreground.

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Figure 2: Two male Plum-headed Finch feeding in Mitchell Grass at Cullyamurra Waterhole on Cooper Creek, 10 July 2010.

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