EDITOR’S NOTE:
Since the original publication of the following article the genus of the Plum-headed Finch has been changed from Aidemosyne to Neochmia.

CARE AND MANAGEMENT OF AUSTRALIAN SEED-EATING FINCHES

#8 THE PLUM-HEAD
Aidemosyne modesta
By Eric Baxter

The Plum-head or Cherry Finch, as it is often referred to in other parts of the world, has been a favourite of fanciers for many years. Although a little less colourful than some of our finches, it is far from a drab looking bird, in fact, the markings on its plumage lend most admirably to the sleek build of this finch, and when in perfect condition they show themselves off well in an aviary.

Being in the cheaper range of the Australian finches, these, when available are readily procured by the beginner, and in the past some meritorious breeding achievements have been recorded. This is most encouraging to the beginner and a great incentive, even though they may be neglected later for a better class of bird. A reasonably hardy bird, once acclimatised\(^1\) they settle down well to aviary conditions, added to which their life span in captivity compares most favourably with that of many of our other seed-eating finches.

They appear to do equally well, whether housed in a small cage or in a planted flight aviary. However, it is felt that the planted flight aviary is more suited to them, as they prefer to select nesting sites in tall growing grass and shrubs, plus the fact that they are an active bird and thoroughly enjoy the extra space, and delight in foraging in and around shrubs and plants. Also when it is contemplated to house them in a small cage, this
should be of reasonable dimensions, and anything under 6’ x 6’ x 4’ (1.8m x 1.8m x 1.2m) should not be entertained. In each instance provision should be made to protect them from wind and rain, and extremely hot weather.

A very docile bird at all times, they can be housed with a collection of mixed finches without any worry. Rarely will they be noticed taking part in any aviary squabbles, whether housed in single pairs or in community, and in reference to the latter some care should be taken to provide adequate space if it is intended to encourage them to breed. Occasionally a pair may refuse to nest, but this in most instances can be attributed to man-made pairs, these being unsuited to each other will make no attempt to nest no matter how perfect the conditions may be. Fortunately supplies permit fanciers to overcome these adversities, and every effort should be made to overcome this by changing mates, as very often man-made pairs do not produce young because of this very fact, and having no other choice unless steps are taken to remedy this, they are destined because of their dislike for each other to do little more than occupy the aviary as exhibits.

In their natural habitat they frequent areas in Queensland and New South Wales, and in comparison to the areas covered by many of our other seed eating finches, they appear to be confined to smaller areas, but in proportion their numbers appear to compare favourably with others that are distributed over a much wider area. A bird that also frequents areas close to settlements in addition to grassland areas, they appear to be quite at home in and around country towns. Reports that have come to hand from time to time indicate that their nesting activities are confined to tall-growing grasses, bushes and thickly foliaged native shrubs.

As mentioned they are not a brightly coloured bird, but the pattern of these colours tend to make them a sleek-looking bird. Being mainly grey and white, the remaining colours they carry tend to break the monotony of these two colours. The head colouring, by virtue of which this species is known, is a deep plum colour. This colour at a distance is not noticed very clearly, but appears to be black, however, on closer examination and with the light and sun in the right direction the deep hue of this colouring is noticeable. The males feature this colour which covers the top of the head, in addition to which they also feature a small black bib under the chin. Markings on the body are mainly narrow dark grey stripes across the breast, these extend down the body on both sides, with the lower portion of the abdomen white. These stripes are really a prominent feature, and any bird carrying a lighter shading separating these markings stands out very prominently and distinctively. The back and wings are dark grey with white spots on the lower portion of the wings and across the rump. The tail feathers are black, and the beak also is black, legs a grey colour.
female is identical in body, wing and rump markings, with a slightly lighter shade of grey on the wings and back. The beak also appears to be slightly lighter. The variations of the sexes as applicable to these birds is the difference of the colouring and feather pattern on the head. As against the male, the hen is minus the prominent head colouring, which on close examination is of a very light shade.

Once they are settled in the aviary and nesting is contemplated, they soon commence to attend to these duties. Their choice of nesting site varies considerably, depending mainly on the facilities available to them. If this is in a shrub they usually prefer to build their nest near the edge. On the other hand, if a site is selected in tall growing grass, they will prefer to build their nest well in the centre of the clump. If either of these facilities is not available, and nest boxes and logs are provided, very rarely will they select the latter, and on practically every occasion they will build their nest in the brush. Finally when a site has been selected they really get busy, giving the impression that they wish to complete it as quickly as possible. Very similar to that of (most of) our seed-eating finches, the nest when completed is a dome-shaped structure with a side entrance. Material used for outer construction consists of coarse dry grass, with occasional pieces of green grass added to this, which incidentally, if available in liberal quantity, will be preferred to dry grass. As the nest takes shape finer material is included, and for final lining they prefer a few feathers. When the nest is built in a shrub, or brush, the branches and twigs will serve to support it. However, should the site be in tall growing grass, a little extra care will be warranted, and it may be necessary to assist by securing the nest to prevent it being dislodged during rough weather. Usually the nest is reasonably secure, mainly by virtue of the fact that as this is being constructed, leaves of the grass it is being built in are conveniently woven into the outer material, serving a dual purpose.

Laying of eggs usually commences as soon as the nest is completed. Clutches vary considerably, anything from four to seven eggs may be laid. Incubation in most instances commences after the second or third egg has been laid, and these duties are shared by the birds during the day with the hen taking over for the night. During the first few days of incubation they have a tendency to flush easily, and become very agitated if the intruder happens to be in close proximity to their nest. In fact, if nest-building operations have escaped detection, this behaviour will be instrumental in assisting to locate their nest.

Incubation takes approximately 12 days, and for the first week the chicks are rarely left uncovered. As they progress the parent birds relax this habit, and eventually in about three weeks the young leave the nest. The
parent birds are very attentive and concerned for their welfare during the first few days after leaving the nest, but as they progress they relax this care.

The diet they require when feeding young is really no problem, and provided an abundance of seeding grass is available, this will satisfy them sufficiently to rear their young. In fact, they relish this type of food, and although an occasional pair may indulge in a little live food, perhaps an odd mealworm or two and a few white ants\textsuperscript{2}, the majority will prefer seeding grasses.

Young birds on leaving the nest are grey in colour, with black beaks, and legs of a light colour. They attain their adult plumage in approximately four months, regardless of the time of year they are bred. Removal to a holding cage after they have become independent is advisable; this eliminates the possibility of interference with the parent birds should they decide to nest again. Of this they are capable, as activities of one appears to be the concern of all, and this eventually will upset any further attempts by the parents to nest, and could also interfere with other species that are busily engaged at nesting.

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\textsuperscript{2}these days fly pupae could be substituted for the white ants. Ed.