



# **UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT**

## **The Plum-headed Finch**

### ***Neochmia modesta***

By Josie Pyle

#### **Other Names**

Cherry Finch, Plum-capped Finch

#### **Habitat and Distribution**

In the wild, the Plum-headed Finch is found in eastern Australia from central Queensland to southern NSW, in areas of savannah grasslands reeds, tall grasses and lightly timbered grassy river flats.

#### **Description** (see photo above)

A small slender bird 11cm in length. The overall upper body colouration is brown with white spots on the wings. The chest and flanks are white with brown barring and the abdomen is white.

**Sexing:** The male is easily recognised by a plum-purple colouration of the forehead and chin, which is stunning when the bird stands in full sun. In the photograph in the centre-spread, the upper two birds are female and the lower two male

**Immature:** Immature birds resemble a dull version of the female's plumage, but with less obvious head markings or barring. Sexing is possible at 8 weeks when the chin bib of the young males becomes apparent, with full adult plumage attained at 4 months.

#### **Avicultural Notes**

In past years the Plum-headed Finch was considerably more popular than it is now. While its current lack of popularity may be partly due to its lack of bright colours, it is a non-aggressive, hardy and long lived species eminently suitable for mixed collections of Australian or foreign finches. Eric Baxter (see reference below) writes that lack of breeding success in a pair held in a suitable aviary is usually due to incompatibility and recommends swapping birds or allowing young birds to choose their own partners.

## **Housing**

The Plum-headed Finch may be kept in either bare or planted aviaries, although the latter will suit the birds' preference for nesting in shrubs or tall grass. However, even in planted aviaries cane baskets should be provided as some birds still prefer these to making their own nests. If nests are constructed by the birds, they are typically dome-shaped nests, with a side entrance, constructed with coarse grass, lined with finer grass and feathers. Roosting nests are not a feature of this species.

## **Feeding**

A standard small grain finch mix supplemented by seeding grasses and green food. A soaked or sprouted seed mix is appreciated in the breeding season, especially when young are being fed. While Plum-headed Finches will breed without live food, greater success will be achieved if termites, maggots/pupae, mealworms and other live food are provided.

## **Breeding**

In captivity, Plum-headed Finches may breed at any time of the year, but show a preference for cooler months. The male courts the hen by displaying a piece of grass in his beak and bobbing up and down, while emitting a low pitched Clutch size varies between 4 and 7, with eggs incubated by both sexes for 12 days. Chicks remain in the nest for 3 weeks after hatching and take a further 14 days to reach independence. In a small aviary they should then be removed to prevent interference with further breeding attempts by the adults.

## **Summary**

Although not a brightly colourful bird, the Plum-headed Finch has a quiet elegance, with a sleek outline of contrasting brown and white. The Plum-head possesses many of the desirable attributes of an aviary bird, being hardy and non-aggressive, making it a suitable addition to mixed finch and small parrot collections, especially in planted aviaries.

## **References**

- Shephard, M. & Welford, C. (1985). *The Avicultural Writings of Eric Baxter*. Published by the Avicultural Society of South Australia.
- Shephard, M. (1989). *Aviculture in Australia*. Black Cockatoo Press.