

Significant species: The Crimson Finch Looking after the Crimson Finch

Eastern form, (*Neochmia phaeton iredalei*) also known as the 'blood' finch.

Crimson Finches are small birds, with plumage in muted hues of brown but both sexes sport bright red faces and tails, the males wearing the beautiful crimson chests that give the species their name. In Central Queensland, this bird was once widespread from the upper Dawson River through the Mackenzie, Fitzroy, Isaac and Connors Rivers. However, now they can only be seen at scattered sites close to water within a range of around 100km from the lower Isaac River to the lower Connors, Funnel Creek and their tributaries.

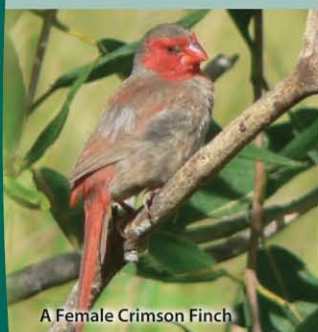
Reasons for decline

We need to understand much more about why the number and distribution of Crimson Finches has declined. However there are some likely factors:

- Cattle grazing too heavily at the wrong time of the year can reduce the amount of River or Cane Grass (*Chionachne*) seeds which are so important to the Finch's diet. However, low to moderate grazing may even be beneficial to the Finch.
- Invasive weeds can also lessen the Finch's food supply.
- Land clearing in the past has often led to changes in the vegetation that cut back on suitable Finch habitat.

Breeding

Crimson Finches form small groups of about 15 closely bonded family members although they are aggressive towards outside groups. Reputed to mate for life, breeding pairs build their nests in river channel trees above the danger of floods. They have up to 5 or 6 chicks and, if conditions are good, they can probably breed more than once a year.



A Female Crimson Finch



A river bank area - the typical habitat of the Crimson Finch.



Close-up of the Chionache seed head.



Feeding habitat for the Crimson Finch

Ideal habitat

Crimson Finches are usually found near:

- Major streams, usually with permanent waterholes reliable in the dry season
- Healthy riparian vegetation with tall trees, shrubs and dense tall grasses, often in association with numerous water channels (runners)
- Large sections of *Chionachne* (also known as River or Cane Grass)
- Areas of low to moderate grazing.

The importance of *Chionachne*

Seeds are a major part of the Crimson Finch's diet. *Chionachne* (*Chionachne cyathopoda*) is a food source vital to the Crimson Finch. *Chionachne* is a perennial grass that grows in large dark green tufts up to 3 metres tall, below the high banks in the flood channels of streams. The seed-heads are unbranched, up to 12 cm long and tightly bunched along the stem. As the *Chionachne* grass can hold its seed well into the dry season, it is regarded as essential to the survival of the Crimson Finch.

Other tall grasses with branched flower heads that may provide a food source or cover for the Crimson Finch include Brown Sorghum (*Sorghum nitidum*), Guinea/Green Panic Grasses (*Panicum maximum*), Reed Grass (*Arundinella nepalensis*) and Umbrella Cane Grass (*Leptochloa digitata*).

Insects also form a part of their diet, particularly in the wet season.



A Male Crimson Finch



Managing grazing to benefit the Crimson Finch

When cattle graze the young Chionachne during the wet season, it is repeatedly eaten down. This means that cover is greatly reduced and it cannot produce enough seed to sustain the finches in the dry season.

However, Chionachne produces ample seed to supply the Crimson Finches when cattle graze it as a dry season reserve.

Landholders can help to protect the Crimson Finch and preserve Chionachne by:

- Grazing river areas lightly in the wet and early dry seasons to give the grass time to set seed
- Grazing river areas moderately in the dry season to allow good seed production
- Avoiding hot late dry season fires.



River areas should only be grazed lightly in the wet season.

Further Research

FBA and Central Queensland University are continuing their research to improve the survival prospects of the Crimson Finch by:

- Mapping the existing habitat
- Locating other populations
- Gaining a better understanding of their food and habitat requirements
- Developing guidelines for grazing and fire management.

Get involved

To find out more about how to implement the management changes that benefit the Crimson Finch, contact the Fitzroy Basin Association on 4999 2800 or visit www.fba.org.au.



A Male Crimson Finch

Report sightings of the Crimson Finch

FBA and Central Queensland University are keen to find new populations of this beautiful little Central Queensland bird. If you've seen a bird that looks like the ones in these photos, contact Wayne Houston at CQU on 49309087.

Photos courtesy of FBA and Robert Black, Central Queensland University

Further information

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