

## Birds in the Northern Territory and the New Finch.

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SOME years ago I undertook a trip to the Northern Territory for the purpose of finding a finch that was said to exist, but had never been caught or adequately described. The bird was said to be the size of a Masked Finch and its colour steel-blue, with white spots. Even to this day, no skin of this bird exists in the Australian Museum, nor, as far as I know, elsewhere.

Although I failed in the purpose of my quest, I have never been sorry that I had the opportunity to travel through these inhospitable regions and to study the ways and habits of the Northern Territory finches in their native home. In these short notes I will not attempt to describe my three months of travel. No written description could give an adequate idea of the country. I would recall the words of the great French writer Chateaubriand who says, in trying to describe the vastness of the prairies of Southern North America, "Je les decrirais en vain a ceux qui nont point parcourrus ces champs primitifs de la nature." I will limit myself to a description of my stay at one water hole called the Granite Rocks, about 200 miles south of Darwin. The extension of the railway from Pine Creek to the Katharine was not then made and I had to hire donkeys at Pine Creek for my further journey. There was a fine little water hole at the Granite Rocks, a locality which derives its name from the huge boulders of granite which are sometimes piled up so that two or three rest on top of one another. It must have been an enormous upheaval which once upon a time lifted these boulders weighing many thousands of tons.

It was July. The sun during the day was blazing hot, but the nights were bitterly cold, the thermometer registering as low as 42 degrees. Game was plentiful. There were plenty of Wild Turkeys (*Eupodotis australis*) and the Partridge Pigeons (*Geophaps smithi*) were exceptionally numerous. One day I counted 87 coming in single file to have their afternoon drink. Jabirus would often pay a visit and wild ducks were plentiful enough at any time. Early in the morning, before the sun rose flocks of parrakeets would fly screaming over our camp, then the Peaceful Doves (*Geopelia placida*) would arrive in untold numbers. In fact the noise of their flight when frightened reminded me of the breakers thundering on a beach. Next to make their appearance were hawks which came to await the arrival of the finches. I cannot remember the different species, but I generally

shot a dozen before breakfast, and amongst them that lovely white species (*Astur nova hollandiae*) which looked almost like a white dove. In view of the enormous quantities which are being destroyed day by day by these hawks, one cannot help thinking that a little more liberality might be shown in issuing permits for the capture of Northern Territory finches for avicultural purposes. Only those who have actually seen the enormous numbers of Gouldian, Long-tailed, Masked and other Finches which come to drink can realise that the disappearance of a thousand dozen out of one flock visiting one water hole would not cause a noticeable diminution in their numbers. It would be like taking the proverbial drop out of a bucket of water.

It is an exceptionally fine sight to see this mass of Gouldian (both red and black-headed with their beautiful purple breasts), Masked and Long-tailed Finches literally covering the ground and trees around the water hole. These three species one finds at every water hole, and always in untold numbers, whereas, the Black-rumped Double-bar (*Steganopleura annulosa*), the Blood Finch (*Neochmia phaeton*) Star Finch (*Bathilda ruficauda*) and Chestnut Finch (*Donacola castaneothorax*) are confined to special localities. That perhaps is the reason why I could not find the bird for which I undertook this interesting but arduous journey.

Whilst the Peaceful Doves came to drink only once a day, in the morning, the Partridge Pigeons, in single file, only drank between two and three in the afternoon. The finches, besides their drink in the morning, would come again about 3 p.m., whereas, the Brown's Parrakeets (*Platycercus venustus*) and Hooded Parrakeets (*Psephotus dissimilis*) came off and on during daytime. They did not seem to have a special time for drinking. I wish to mention specially a Black Robin. I only saw one pair which hung about the camp, the cock, a jet black bird, the hen more sooty, of the same size and habits as the well-known Yellow Robin. It would come readily for a meal worm and would cling slantingly to a sapling as our Yellow Robin does.

All along the route the trees were lined with innumerable nests of the finches, and it appears that families occupy one sleeping nest, probably to keep themselves warm. Further inland towards the Mary River and Alligator swamps, where man with his gun has not penetrated frequently, big water birds are most prolific. In fact it ceases to be sport when one can sit on the edge of a billabong and shoot at flocks of ducks or geese which, on the report of a gun, will just rise and alight again in the same spot.

Perhaps I may be pardoned for mentioning here the beautiful fish suitable for aquaria one finds in the creeks and billabongs. Some species of these will bury in the mud, becoming baked through the heat, until the heavy rains release them once again. These are little mud carps almost purple. Then there are cat-fish which the natives call "needle-fish," and a beautifully shaped silver fish with five black spots on each side called "five-guns," and many others of beautiful coloration, none of them longer than three to four inches.

During my stay near Darwin, I saw amongst a flock of Chestnut Finches (*Donacola castaneothorax*) a bird with a speckled chest like that of a Pectorella (*D. pectoralis*) but otherwise in shape and colour that of a Chestnut. At the time I supposed it to be a hybrid and paid no further attention to it. However, last year I received a very small consignment of Northern Territory birds for which I had kindly been granted a permit. Amongst these I recognised one of my old friends. Carefully examining the bird, I came to the definite conclusion that it was not a hybrid but might be a distinct species, as the Yellow-rumped Finch (*D. flaviprymna*), which also flies with the Chestnuts, is now regarded as distinct. I have shown the live bird to Mr. Kinghorn, of the Australian Museum, and other authorities, but the decision as to whether the bird is a sport or a distinct species has been deferred for the present.

The Northern Territory Chestnut Finches are slightly larger and far more intense in colouring than southern examples of the species. This new bird is of the same size and colour as the southern form of the Chestnut Finch, except that the broad mottled black or almost black band which in the Chestnut Finch divides the brown chest from the white feathers of the abdomen is broken in the centre. The brown breast of the Chestnut Finch is replaced in this bird by scaly feathers of sooty black and dirty white, similar to those on the breast, of the Pectorella. The margins at the side are slightly suffused with very light brown, and the top of the head is very slightly more grey. In the Chestnut Finch the rump is principally black, in this finch it is less black and more nearly resembles that of the Yellow-rumped Finch. In the sun the upper surfaces of the wings show a slight greyish hue, with tiny white spots with a little dash of black over them, similar in colour and markings to those of a Pectorella.

Personally, I am inclined to think that these few birds are the remnants of or reversions to a form ancestral to the Chestnut Finch, the Yellow-rumped Finch and the Pectorella. The bird undoubtedly exhibits characteristics of each of the three species. My specimen is a hen, and I have given it the choice between a cock Pectorella and a cock Chestnut Finch. It has chosen the latter for a mate and I hope, if all goes well, to find out something more definite later on.

The most experienced trapper in the Northern Territory told me that he looked upon these birds as sports. He estimated that three of them may be found amongst a flock of a thousand Chestnut Finches. However, as they are always in existence, I should say they cannot be a sport but must be regarded either as a species or as a reversionary form as suggested above. If they were a sport, one would expect them also to be found amongst the Chestnut Finches south of the Northern Territory, but in my 30 years' experience of bird keeping, I have never seen one in one of the bird shops, where thousands of Chestnut Finches are caged during the year. Enquiry amongst trappers and bird dealers both in Brisbane and Sydney has elicited the information that a bird such as I have described is quite unknown to them.