

## The Introduced Spice Finch in North-eastern Queensland

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During a recent visit to Cairns, north Queensland (April-May 1960), I observed small groups of what I took to be the introduced Spice Finch (*Lonchura punctulata*). On two occasions the birds were in association with flocks of Chestnut-breasted Finches (*Donacola castaneothorax*) on the borders of sugar-cane fields.

The presence of the species in the Cairns district was confirmed by Mrs. Cassels who mentioned to me that the Spice Finch, like the Sparrow and the Indian Myna, seems to prefer settled areas and is seldom seen in the bush away from habitation. The birds have been known to build in the bearers of a workshop roof, and when efforts were made to discourage them they merely selected a nest-site in another part of the same building. Other nesting places were in garden trees and shrubs at heights of from 7 to 12 feet above the ground.

On several occasions the Finches were seen beside the remains of toads and other small animals squashed flat on the roads. Possibly the birds were investigating insects attracted by the dead animals. Mrs. Cassels states that the Spice Finch has never been seen at the bird bath in her garden, nor does it come to the food tray, though other finches, such as the Chestnut-breasted, Red-browed, and Banded are frequent visitors.

Innisfail, 50 miles south of Cairns, is another locality where the Spice Finch is to be found. Mrs. R. G. Gill's records date from April 1955. Nesting was noted a year later and in October 1957 a party of some 35 birds was seen in the district. Breeding has been recorded in February, April, May, November and December.

On May 6, 1960, I was staying at the municipal camping-grounds at Ingham, 100 miles south of Cairns. This reserve borders the main highway and adjoins a busy commercial district. Shortly before dusk a party of five Spice Finches, in adult plumage, flew into a tree near where I was camped. Closer examination of the tree revealed a nest constructed of grasses and strips of bark. It was globular in shape and typical of nests of the Spice Finch found near Sydney, where the species is quite common in certain localities. At dawn next day the birds were moving about the tree and calling continuously; they then flew off towards the cane-fields. It would seem that they comprised a family party using the nest as a night roost.

All the Queensland localities mentioned are in the high-rainfall, sugar-growing areas stretching from the Herbert River to Cairns, 100 miles to the north. This area is well settled and provides suitable habitats for the species.

Townsville is another locality where the species now seems to be well established. Miss Nancy Hopkins has records of the Spice Finch in that area since 1951, when the bird was already established in fairly large flocks. Dr. Klaus Immelmann, the German ornithologist who recently visited Australia studying our finches, also noted the Spice Finch at Townsville, as well as at Ingham and Cairns.

Yet another area in coastal Queensland where the bird occurs is Mackay. During a stay of ten days in May 1960, Mr. Tom Jasper saw two small flocks close to the city area. Mr. J. S. Robertson also saw this species in the same area in September 1959.

The Spice Finch seems to be largely a bird of the coastal lowlands where extensive areas of grasslands, cane-fields and cultivation paddocks provide suitable habitats. Mr. J. A. Bravery, whilst aware of the species' existence on the coastal lowlands of Cairns, has failed to observe it on the Atherton Tablelands, some 10 miles inland and having an average elevation of 2500 feet.

The species is common near Brisbane where it has been established for more than 20 years (Jack, 1957). It frequents grassy areas, undergrowth (particularly lantana) and the bushy sides of watercourses. During 1956-7 I constantly found it in flocks of up to 100 birds in the Enoggera rifle-range area and at Kedron Brook. It has spread out from Brisbane, having been observed in large flocks near Esk. It has also been noted at Murphy's Creek in the foothills of the Great Divide, west of Brisbane (Lord, 1956).

I have noticed on many occasions that the species associates with other finches. The species concerned are usually the Chestnut-breasted Finch and the Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia castanotis*), but I have also seen it with the Plum-headed Finch (*Aidemosyne modesta*). This raised the question as to what effect the rapid increase of the Spice Finch will have on native species. There is already some evidence that it may be proving a successful competitor. Mrs. Cassels has recorded a noticeable decrease in the numbers of the Chestnut-breasted Finch at Cairns, and Miss Hopkins writes from Townsville: "The Zebra Finch has been crowded out; I can be fairly definite about this. Since the advent of the Spice Finch the Zebra Finch has disappeared from the localities which are constantly under my eye, that is the neighbourhood of my home and of my place of work. The Spice Finch is now breeding in both areas."

#### SUMMARY

The Spice Finch is widely distributed in the coastal areas of Brisbane, Mackay, Townsville and the high-rainfall areas near Ingham and Cairns.

The species has apparently been well established in north-eastern Queensland for a considerable time. Whether the 600-mile gap between Mackay and Brisbane is occupied by

the species, or whether the Mackay, Townsville, and Ingham-Cairns population are linked, are problems awaiting future observers.

There can be no reasonable doubt that the Spice Finches now occurring in various parts of eastern coastal Australia, from Sydney to Cairns, originated from escapees from aviaries, or from birds purposely liberated. Years ago large numbers of these birds were brought into Australia on ships from south-east Asia and sold as cage birds.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### REFERENCES

- Jack, N., 1957. *Birds of Brisbane*, p. 23.  
Lord, E. A. R., 1956. "The Birds of the Murphy's Creek District, Southern Queensland", *Emu*, 56: 128.
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**"Cattle Egret" proves to be a Little Egret.**—In *The Emu* (vol. 60, 1960, p. 202) John L. McKean refers to the reported recovery in Trinidad, West Indies, of a Cattle Egret (*Ardeola ibis*) banded at Coto Donana, Spain, "a year previously". Actually the bird was banded as a nestling on July 24, 1956, and captured on January 13, 1957. As mentioned by John McKean, the specimen was stated to be a Cattle Egret by Guy Mountfort (*Portrait of a Wilderness*, 1958, p. 100); the same statement appears in the American edition of the book which was published under the title *Wild Paradise*.

Sr. J. A. Valverde originally advised that the bird was a Cattle Egret, thus the report to that effect in *Portrait of a Wilderness* (Guy Mountfort, *per. comm.*). However, when the specimen was checked against comparative material in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, it was found that the supposed "Cattle Egret" was a Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta*, in first winter dress. The facts of the case were published in the *Auk*, Vol. 76, 1959, pp. 241-2, by Wilbur G. Downs.

Trinidad is some 4000 miles across the Atlantic from the Spanish locality where the Little Egret was banded less than six months earlier. The occurrence is a striking example of a trans-Atlantic migration in a species closely related to the Cattle Egret, a bird which has extended its range very considerably within the past 25 years or so.—J. M. HEWITT, Sydney, 1/11/1960.