

# Eastern Spinebill

*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*

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Hunter Bird  
Observers Club

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A male Eastern Spinebill, with all-dark crown. Note the dark crescent band and chestnut central throat patch and mantle (photo: Rob Palazzi)

## Description

This is a small lively honeyeater with a distinctive strongly-curved bill. Adult birds have a prominent black crescent on their breast, which surrounds a white throat and upper breast, with a chestnut central throat patch. They have a dark to darkish crown, rich chestnut mantle, orange-brown underparts and dark grey upperparts. A broad white tip to the outer tail feathers is very obvious in flight.

Males are slightly larger than females on average but there is a lot of overlap in sizes and that is not a useful indicator in the field. However, males have a glossy black crown compared with a grey-olive crown for females. The paler-coloured crown of the female contrasts with her dark lores and ear-coverts.

Juvenile birds lack the black crescent on the breast and the chestnut central

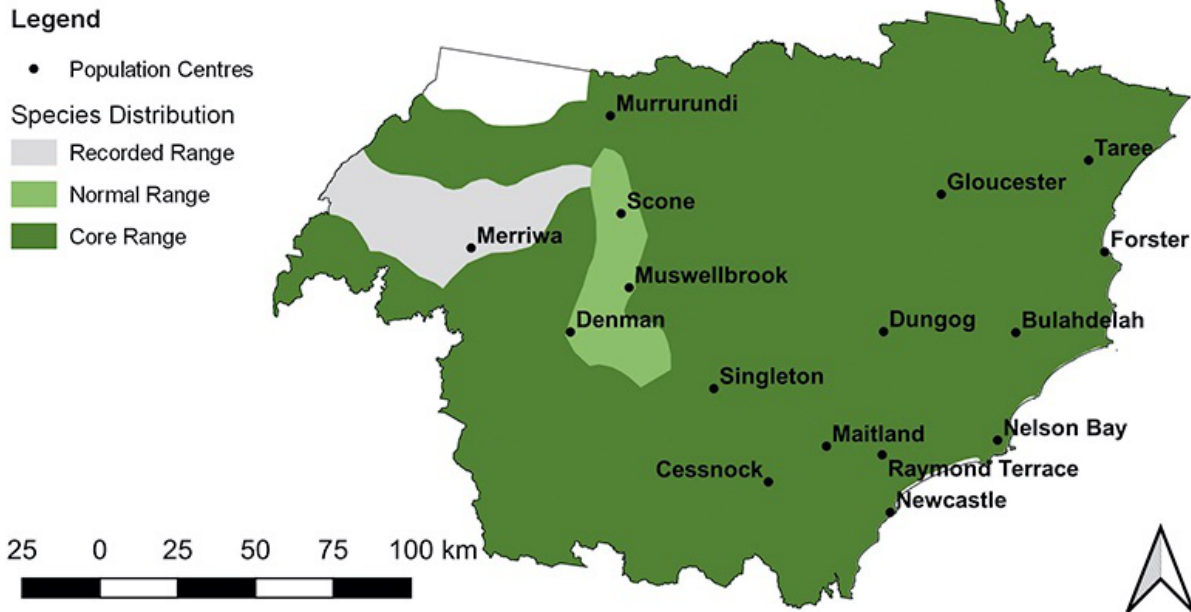
throat patch, and they have a brown iris (which is bright red in adults) and an overall duller appearance. The lower mandible has a cream-yellow base and they have a yellow gape. The timings of the moult stages to adult plumage are not well understood, but immature birds progressively develop throat and crescent plumage and a richer coloration, until attaining full adult plumage at around 12 months of age.



Female Eastern Spinebill, with grey-olive crown and strongly contrasting lores and ear-coverts (photo: Jim Smart)

### Regional Status

The Eastern Spinebill is a common and widespread resident of our region, as the map shows. There are some seasonal movements within and/or into the region, as discussed later.



Distribution map for Eastern Spinebill in the Hunter Region (map prepared by Dan Williams).

### Migration or movement?

Studies elsewhere have arrived at three different conclusions – that Eastern Spinebills are resident, that they are nomadic, and that they migrate. Possibly all three answers are correct, depending upon the location. There is limited evidence locally for a migration passage. For example, the proportion of Eastern Spinebills within migrating flocks of passerines at Mt Sugarloaf is very low and they might even just be local birds briefly joining a moving flock.

However, there is a regular influx of Eastern Spinebills into the Gloucester Tops in autumn, when typically many Banksias are in flower. Although there are some birds present all year, the numbers rise substantially in autumn as do those for several other honeyeater species. It is not known if this is a short-distance movement by Eastern Spinebills (e.g. of birds from lower altitudes) or if it involves birds that have migrated over longer distances. However, because it happens every year (providing that the Banksias are in flower) it seems justified to consider it to be a migration.



An immature Eastern Spinebill, with rudimentary crescent breast band and throat patch but a fully dark bill (photo: Alwyn Simple)

## Subspecies

Four subspecies are recognised – ours is the nominate form *tenuirostris* (South-east Eastern Spinebill) which has a range extending from mid-Queensland down to about Mount Gambier in South Australia. The other three subspecies occur in northern Queensland (the Atherton Tableland), Tasmania and South Australia (Kangaroo Island and the Mount Lofty Ranges). The differences between the various subspecies are subtle.

## About the name

### Eastern Spinebill

Early European settlers called this commonly-seen bird the “spine-bill”. Gould went with that, although removing the hyphen. There are two recognised species of spinebill in Australia – they are named geographically i.e. Eastern and Western.

### *Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*

The scientific name derives from four Greek words: *acantha* (meaning spine) plus *rhunkhos* (bill), and *tenuis* (slender or thin) plus *rostrum* (another term for bill). Clearly there is redundancy in the scientific name but initially our bird was

classified as a honeyeater and named as *Certhia tenuirostris* (a genus which is now used for Northern Hemisphere creepers!).



An immature Eastern Spinebill – note the cream-yellow lower mandible and the absence of throat patch and crescent breast band, and the generally duller plumage (photo: Max Maddock)

**Design** Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1999). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines).  
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