

# Red-browed Finch include amphibian larvae in diet

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The diet of the subspecies of Red-browed Finch *Neochmia temporalis temporalis* includes amphibian larvae, which has not been previously documented.

## INTRODUCTION

The diet of Red-browed Finches *Neochmia temporalis* has been extensively studied in various geographic areas of Australia. The bird lives along the east coast of Australia with the greater population east of the coastal divide. There are three noted subspecies, but the observations in this report are confined to *N. temporalis temporalis*. This subspecies is only occurs in NSW. The present observations were made in the Olney State Forest of the Watagan Mountains NSW. Red-browed Finches visited the study site in the warmer months where it was observed that they include amphibian larvae in their diet, catching them from the surface of ponds.

## TECHNIQUE

A polyethylene artificial 50-litre water hole was set up on a ridge 300m from a dry-bed natural water course. The site was in eucalypt forest 428m above sea level. Documentation of birds attending to drink or bathe was performed intermittently over a two-year period. 42 species attended this site. The attendance was weather dependent with visitations increasing in hot dry periods. Observation totalled 260hrs with 125 visits. These were weather dependent, but averaged a two-hour observation period each week. The period of study was 1 February 2013 to 1 February 2015.



Red-browed Finches holding tadpoles caught at a waterhole in the Watagan Mountains. (Photos by Bruce Hosken)

## DISCUSSION and OBSERVATIONS

Red-browed Finches are uncommon in the dense forest of the Watagan Mountains where the waterhole was established and apart from roadside grass there is not a lot of monocotyledon seed, which normally constitutes the greater part of their diet (Read 1994) so in this area they were considered transients. The finches attended the study site between November and February, usually in pairs; the largest group visiting in December was six.

In January 2014, the first documented observation of *Neochmia temporalis* catching amphibian larvae was made and the behaviour was photographed. This behaviour was documented on a further four occasions, the last being January 2015.

The fishing technique involved the bird walking around the pool looking for aquatic food, and then catching the amphibian larva with a quick bill snatch, reaching under the water surface. At no time did the bird submerge its head to more than eye level and one bird caught four larvae in a 10 minute period. All catching was performed in a standing mode. Most larvae were swallowed immediately, though on several occasions the bird would first throw the tadpole onto adjacent ground.

No observations were made of the bird using feet or bill whipping to kill the tadpole before swallowing. The species of the tadpole was not determined. The size of tadpole caught was small and always pre-metamorphic.

## CONCLUSIONS

Grass finches in Australia are well known to eat insects and larvae to supplement a seed diet, and insects may be part of the diet for new hatchlings (Cole 1908, Scopfer 1989). Crop studies of wild birds have revealed non-insect live food consumption has been rare. In particular no reports of vertebrate larvae have been made. In a study of Red-browed Finches in South Australia, Mollusca: Gastropod was reported from crop analysis (Read 1994).

Whether the inclusion of tadpole in the diet of these finches coincides with the feeding of new

hatchlings, similar to the feeding of insects, was not determined. Although the birds only attended the waterhole during the breeding season no finch nests were apparent in the vicinity of the waterhole.

## REFERENCES

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