

# Zebra Finch

*Taeniopygia castanotis*

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Hunter Bird  
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A male Zebra Finch (photo: Mick Roderick)

## General Comments

Adult males are striking birds – they have an orange-red bill, a large orange-brown cheek patch fronted by a black and white “teardrop”, white-spotted rufous flanks and a black tail which has four white bands. Females are plainer but they retain the orange-red bill (however, it’s not as reddish as that of the males), black and white “teardrop” and barred black and white tail.

Juveniles are plainer than adult females, and their bill is black. They begin their moult into adult plumage at around 35-40 days (although some males begin as early as 20 days old) and they can breed from when about 60-70 days old. Breeding is strongly influenced by rainfall, and after good rain birds can rear several broods in rapid succession.

Zebra Finches are seed-eaters, though they occasionally take insects. Although several laboratory studies have shown that they can survive for many months with little or no water (if there is no heat stress), in the wild they drink often and are rarely found far from a waterbody. They prefer fresh water but can tolerate salinity. All of the Australian finch species drink water by sucking – pigeons and doves also drink this way, but very few other passerines do so.

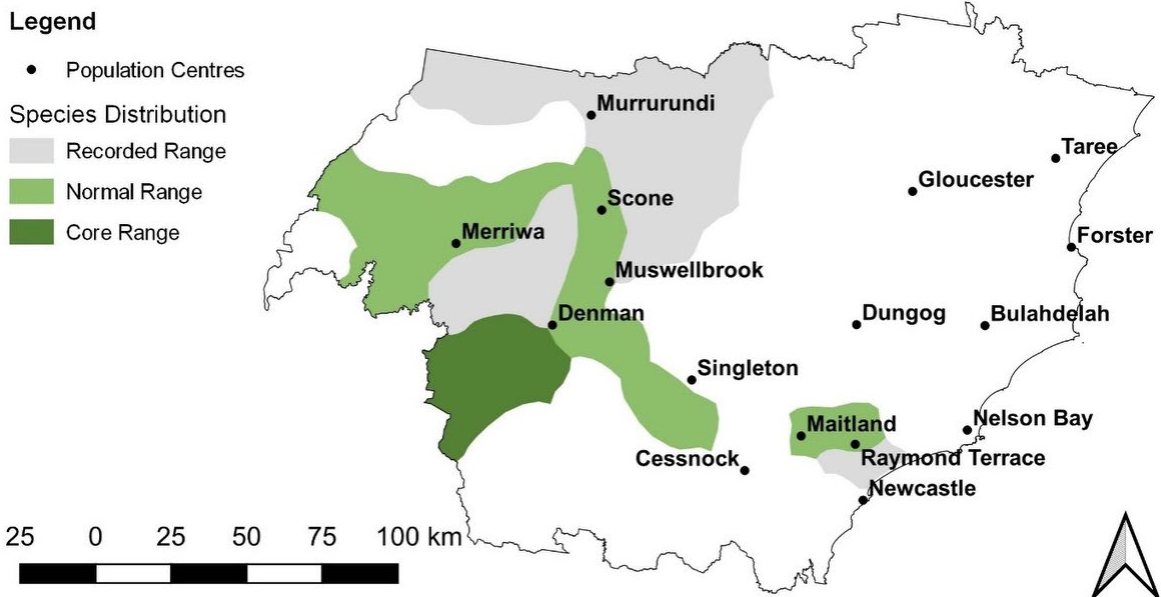
Because they breed so prolifically (when conditions are favourable), Zebra Finches are the most common and widespread finch in Australia. For the same reason, they are also very common in aviaries world-wide. They are perhaps the most studied bird species in the world – their fecundity plus ease of handling makes them an ideal subject for laboratory studies. They are in effect the “white mice” of the bird world.



Three female Zebra Finches (photo: Ann Lindsey)

### **Regional Status**

The Zebra Finch is a breeding resident in the Hunter Region, found mostly in dryer inland parts of the region. Their range has contracted – up until the late 1990s they were regularly recorded at Stockton Sandspit and other places around the lower Hunter (however, it's possible that some of those populations derived from aviary escapees). Numbers seem to have dropped within their main local range too – sightings of flocks of 50-100 birds are quite uncommon now.



Distribution of the Zebra Finch in the Hunter Region (map by Dan Williams).

## Sub-species

There are no recognised sub-species. However, there is a closely-related species found in Indonesia’s Lesser Sundas (the Sunda Zebra Finch *T. guttata*) and until 2018 the two species were lumped as one species by most taxonomists.

It may seem surprising that a species with such a widespread distribution and which is sedentary most of the time, has no subspecies in Australia. During severe droughts, birds do leave their “usual” area in search of better sources of water and food – and at such oases there are lots of opportunities for inter-breeding between other, normally distant, populations.

## Nesting

Zebra Finches nest semi-communally, in colonies that range in size from a handful of birds to many hundreds of them. Dump-nesting often occurs, which is when an intruding female lays an egg in another female’s nest. They form loose colonies – for example, a 3ha area (150m by 20m) near York in WA was found to have 230 nests. Sometimes, a few pairs nest a short distance (70-100m) from the main colony.

Frequently they build their nests at the base of a larger nest – such as that of a raptor or a corvid – and there have been occasional reports of more unusual nest site choices – most famously, in 2022 a Zebra Finch nested in the carcass of a strung-up Dingo (ABC News item).

## About the name

### Zebra Finch

The origins of “finch” are obscure. There might be a link to a Greek word for a young bird, and several Indo-European languages have related words, all referencing “colour”. It’s a mess! Much more straightforwardly, “Zebra” references our bird’s conspicuously barred tail.

### *Taeniopygia castanotis*

The genus name also references our bird’s barred tail – it derives from the Greek words *tainia*, a band, and *pugē*, rump or tail. The species name is from the Greek words *kastanon*, chestnut, and *notos*, backed.



Zebra Finches drinking water by sucking, in pigeon style (photo: Dan Herbert)

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