

Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g. crows). They show great diversity of form, behaviour and breeding biology.

**YELLOWHAMMER** *Emberiza citrinella*

Common European introduction

16 cm, 27 g. Sparrow-sized mainly yellow bird of open country with reddish-brown upperparts, streaked darker; rufous rump and white outer tail feathers. Adult male has bright yellow head and underparts, head lightly marked brown on crown and on sides of face; cinnamon wash across breast, and pale yellow flanks. Adult female duller and paler yellow, more heavily marked brown on head, and breast band greyish green. Juvenile and immature even paler yellow or pale buff, heavily streaked, but still with rufous rump. Hops on ground when feeding, often with crouched posture. Outside breeding season, often form flocks on weed-infested crops and where hay has been scattered. Male song is rendered 'little bit of bread and no cheese'. Call a ringing metallic 'tink', or 'twick'. **Habitat:** Open country from sea level to sub-alpine, especially arable farmland or rough pasture with scattered scrub. **Breeding:** Oct–Mar. [Sp 312]



**BUNTINGS, CARDINALS and TANAGERS**

Emberizidae

552 species worldwide, except Australasia; 2 species introduced to New Zealand. Small birds of open country, with short,

robust, conical bills adapted for husking and crushing seeds. The lower bill is hinged at the base to allow large seeds to be swallowed.

**312. YELLOWHAMMER** *Emberiza citrinella*

Plate 72

**Size:** 16 cm, 27 g  
**Distribution:** Natural breeding range is Eurasia from Britain to Siberia; many migrate south to winter in North Africa, the Middle East and southern Asia. About 500 Yellowhammers were introduced into New Zealand by Acclimatisation Societies between 1862 and the early 1870s. They were released in both islands and spread quickly so that by 1900 they were well established throughout the mainland. Now they are found throughout the North, South and Stewart Islands and many offshore islands, and have colonised the Kermadecs and the Chathams, although they remain uncommon on Chatham Island. There is no clear evidence of migration within New Zealand, but vagrants have reached The Snares, Campbell and Lord Howe Islands. Yellowhammers are in farmland, orchards and open tussockland from sea level to subalpine herbfields at 1600 m.  
**Population:** Widespread and locally common.  
**Breeding:** Males start territorial singing in late August. Laying is from October to mid-February, during which two broods are normally raised. The nest is usually built on or very close to the ground in gorse, blackberry, bracken, long grass or other clump of

thick vegetation on a bank or other ungrazed ground. A few nests are built above 1 m in a tree, and some have even been built in old Song Thrush nests. The nest is a cup of dry grass, lined with rootlets, moss, hair, wool and feathers. They lay 3–4–5 whitish-pink eggs (21 x 16 mm) covered in fine scribbling of dark brown lines. The female does most incubation during the incubation period of 12–13–14 days. Both parents share the feeding of the young during the fledging period of 12–13 days. The oldest Yellowhammer recorded in New Zealand lived 9+ years, but in Europe one lived 11+ years.  
**Behaviour:** Yellowhammers are territorial during breeding, but in autumn and winter they form flocks of up to 200–300 birds at good food sources such as spilt grain or where stockfood or hay is being fed out. Male Yellowhammers have a distinctive and monotonous song, usually delivered from a conspicuous perch, and rendered 'chitty-chitty-chitty... sweee' or 'a little bit of bread and no cheese', the 'swee' or 'cheese' is omitted at the start (August) and end (February) of the singing season. The call-note is a ringing 'tink' or 'chip'; a single 'twick' is the usual flight call, and a liquid 'twitup'

is characteristic of winter flocks.  
**Feeding:** Diet is a mix of seeds and invertebrates. Seeds are from a variety of introduced weeds, grasses, clover and cereals. Invertebrates include caterpillars, beetles, flies, bugs and spiders. They feed mainly on the ground, and hop as they search for food in short grass or on bare ground. Yellowhammers sometimes eat newly sown seeds, but generally they are regarded as a colourful addition to open landscapes rather than as a serious pest.

cf. 78–82–86 mm). Adult males are much brighter yellow than females or juveniles, and can be reliably told by having over half of each crown feather yellow with a greyish-green tip and a tiny black spot or streak on the feather shaft near the tip. Adult females and first-year males have broad greyish-brown tips to their crown feathers, a narrow central yellow portion and broad black base, and a narrow black shaft streak, while first-year (and rarely adult) females have little yellow on the crown feathers and a prominent black shaft streak. In autumn, adults moult wing and tail feathers, whereas juveniles do not; and so in winter adults have fresh rounded feathers, whereas first-year birds have worn feathers.

**In the hand:** Males are larger than females, but their measurements overlap (wing 82–87–97 mm

**Reading:** Harrison, J.M. 1955. *Notornis* 6: 176–177.