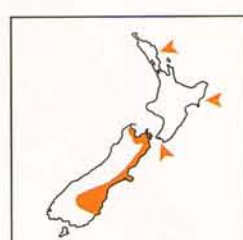


Passerines are the largest group of birds. They are small to medium sized land birds found worldwide, except on Antarctica. All species have four toes, three pointing forward and one back, well-adapted for perching. Most species are song-birds, with complex musical calls, but there are exceptions (e.g.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

CIRL BUNTING *Emberiza cirrus*

Uncommon European introduction

16 cm, 25 g. Sparrow-sized bird of open country, similar to Yellowhammer in size and shape and also with white outer tail feathers, but much less yellow and *rump greyish olive*. Adult male distinctive with black throat, head boldly striped black and yellow, crown and nape dark grey, fading to pale grey wash across breast; upperparts brown, streaked darker; cinnamon patches on wings and sides of lower breast, rest of underparts pale yellow streaked darker. Adult female and juvenile nondescript mix of buff, yellow and brown, heavily streaked on crown and finely streaked on breast and flanks. Hops on ground when feeding, often with crouched posture. Outside breeding season, often form small flocks on waste ground. Male song a *monotonous metallic cricket-like rattling buzz*. Calls include a thin 'zit' or 'see', and a soft brief 'tyu'. **Habitat:** Dry pastoral or arable farmland with scattered scrub, and pine and macrocarpa shelterbelts, mainly in Nelson and eastern South I, especially Marlborough and Central Otago. Some move to coastal wasteland and saltmarsh in winter. **Breeding:** Oct-Feb. [Sp 313]



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.

313. CIRL BUNTING *Emberiza cirrus*

Plate 72

Size: 16 cm, 25 g
Distribution: An uncommon and declining sedentary species of southern Europe, North Africa and Turkey, which has its northern limit in southern England. Records indicate that only a few Cirl Buntings were introduced to New Zealand by Acclimatisation Societies: seven were liberated in Otago in 1871, and four in Wellington in 1880 (possibly from Otago stock). Cirl Buntings spread widely but are the rarest of the introduced birds, although easily overlooked. They are found in open country from Northland to southern Otago, but mainly in drier pastoral country with scattered trees or hedgerows, or rough grassland with patches of gorse, briar and matagouri, east of the Main Divide from Gisborne to Otago (especially in Marlborough and Central Otago) and near Nelson. There is some local or nomadic movement and winter flocking into suitable coastal grassland and saltmarsh habitats.
Population: Rare (perhaps 2000-5000 birds), but locally common in Marlborough and Central Otago, and small winter flocks are recorded each year at coastal sites in Tasman Bay.
Conservation: Unprotected introduced species. Cirl Buntings have declined significantly in their natural range, especially in Britain (where the population declined from c. 300 pairs in 1970 to 167 in 1982), probably

because of changes to agricultural practices. Continued persecution of small birds in southern Europe makes their status in Europe tenuous, and so the New Zealand population could become internationally important.
Breeding: Males start territorial singing in late August. Laying is in October-January, during which two broods are probably raised. The nest is built in thick vegetation in a gorse bush, matagouri, briar or macrocarpa 1-5 m from the ground. It is a cup of dry grass and moss, lined with fine grass, hair and wool, sometimes placed in the old nest of another species. They lay 2-3-4 bluish-green eggs (21 x 16 mm) covered in black streaks and hairlines. The female incubates for 11-13 days and is fed on the nest by the male. Both parents feed the young during the fledging period of 11-13 days.
Behaviour: Cirl Buntings are territorial during breeding, and some seem to remain on territory all year. In February-August, some birds form flocks of 5-15 birds, mainly in coastal wasteland but also recorded in Central Otago, or join winter flocks of Yellowhammers. The territorial call of the male is heard in the early morning and late afternoon from about mid-August and regularly from October. It is a monotonous, metallic, rattling buzz, resembling a black cricket, delivered up to nine times per minute from a high perch in a tree or powerline. Call notes are a thin

'zit' or 'see', sometimes run together in flight to form a strident 'sissi-sissi-sip'.
Feeding: Diet has not been studied in detail in New Zealand, but they have been seen feeding on seeds of barley grass and weeds, and adults feed their young caterpillars and moths.

78-79 mm). Males have a greyish-black throat and chin rather than dull yellowish, spotted darker, in females. First-year males can be similar to bright adult females, but in January-March adults moult wing and tail feathers, while juveniles moult only a few central tail feathers. In winter, adults therefore have fresh rounded feathers, whereas first-year birds have worn feathers, except for fresh central tail feathers.

In the hand: Males are larger than females, but measurements overlap (wing 77-80-83 mm cf. 76-

Reading: Taylor, T.J. 1978. *Notornis* 25: 249-251.