

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.

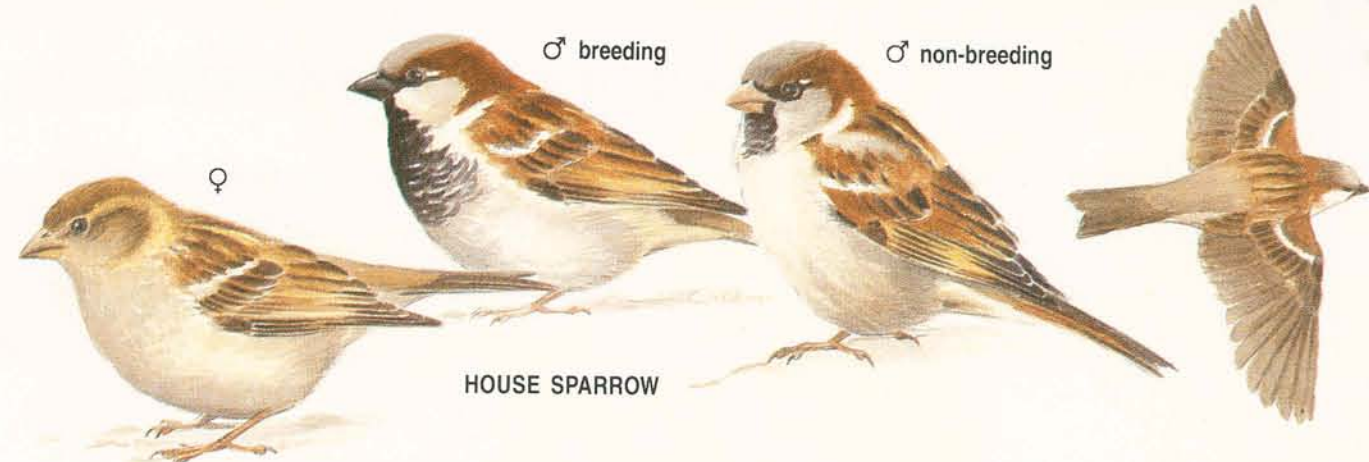
CHAFFINCH *Fringilla coelebs*

Abundant European introduction

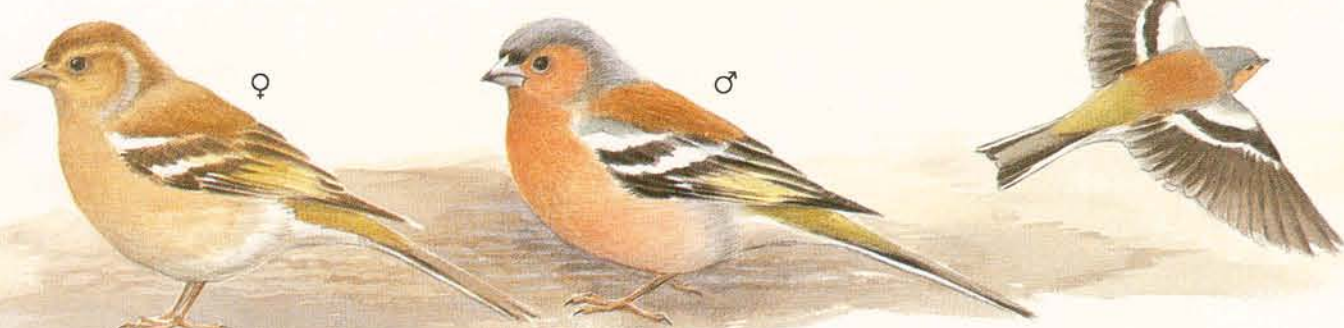
15 cm; ♂ 22 g, ♀ 21 g. Sparrow-sized finch with *conspicuous white shoulder, wingbar and outer tail feathers*. Adult male has black forehead, blue-grey crown and nape; *rich pinkish-brown face and underparts*, fading to white on belly; reddish-brown back; olive rump. Female and juvenile lack male colours; mainly soft brownish grey, except greenish rump and prominent white wingbars on darker wing. Flight undulating; flight call a soft single 'tsip'. *Male song a series of short loud notes, ending in a flourish: 'chip chip chip tell tell tell cherry-erry-erry tissi cheweeo'*, usually given from a high perch. Usual calls a metallic 'pink' or 'chwink-chwink', and a whistling 'huit'. **Habitat:** Native and exotic forest, scrub, farmland, tussockland, parks and gardens. **Breeding:** Sep–Feb.



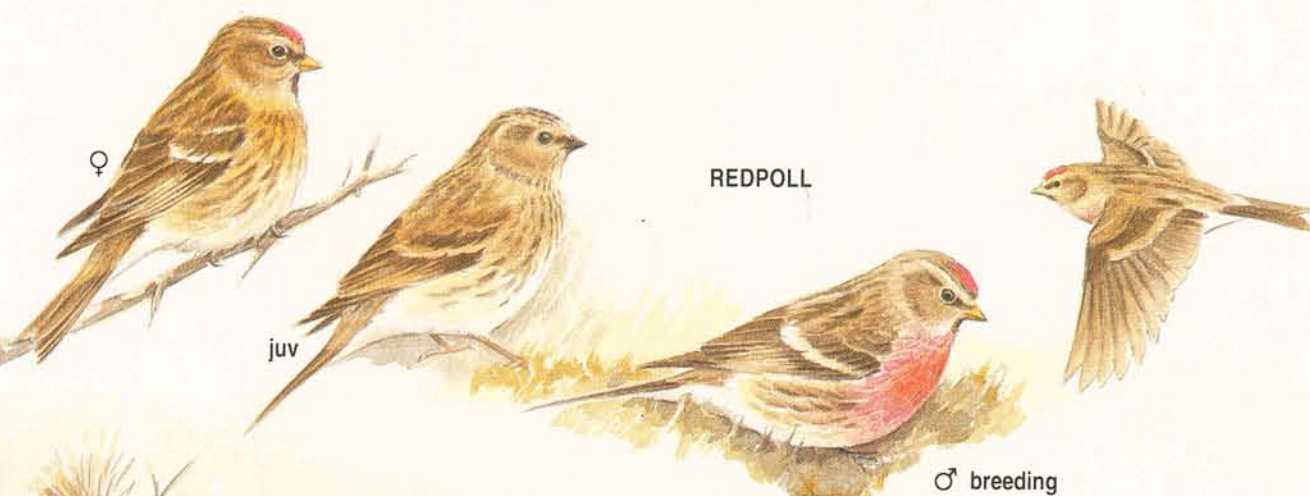
[Sp 314]



HOUSE SPARROW



CHAFFINCH



REDPOLL



GOLDFINCH

FINCHES

Fringillidae

153 species worldwide, except Australasia; 4 introduced to New Zealand.

instead of the usual 10 primary flight feathers. Most have small, neat, cup-shaped nests. Their songs are varied and musical.

Small, often colourful birds of open country with short, stout, conical bills and powerful gizzards for breaking up seeds. They have 9

Reading: Newton, I. 1972. *Finches*. London: Collins.

314. CHAFFINCH *Fringilla coelebs*

Plate 71

Size: 15 cm; male 22 g, female 21 g

Distribution: Natural range is Europe, North Atlantic islands, North Africa, the Middle East and western and central Asia; introduced to South Africa and New Zealand. Several hundred birds were liberated in New Zealand by various Acclimatisation Societies in 1862–80. They were slow to establish, but spread widely in the late 1800s and were well established throughout the country by 1920. Now abundant throughout the mainland and offshore islands, and breeding on the Chathams, The Snares, Auckland and Campbell Islands. Vagrants have been recorded from the Kermadecs, Antipodes and Lord Howe Island. They are in farmland, orchards, gardens, exotic plantations and native forest, from sea level to subalpine scrub at 1400 m. Although northern populations in Europe are migratory, there is no evidence of regular migration here; however, Chaffinches flock in winter and congregate in orchards and on stubble and where grain is being fed to stock. **Population:** Abundant throughout New Zealand.

Breeding: Pairs form in early spring as winter flocks break up, and males start singing in late July. The female builds the nest over a period of 1–2 weeks. It is a neat cup of dry grass and moss, camouflaged with lichen and lined with hair, feathers and wool, and is usually firmly placed in a fork of a branch or between the trunk and a side branch 1–3–18 m above the ground. Manuka, matagouri, gorse, pine and willow are commonly used sites. Laying is from mid-September to late January, with a peak in October–November. They lay 3–4–6 greyish-blue (occasionally pink) eggs (20 x 14 mm) with purplish blotches. The female alone incubates for 11–13–15 days, and the eggs hatch over 1–3 days. The chicks are brooded by the female and are frequently fed whole invertebrates by both parents. They continue to be fed by both parents for c. 3 weeks after the fledging period of 10–14–16 days. The oldest Chaffinch recorded in New Zealand lived almost 10 years, but in Europe the record is 13+ years. **Behaviour:** Gregarious in autumn and winter, forming flocks of several hundred birds, often

mixed in with other finches. Flocks are sometimes just of one sex. From late July to January, males advertise their territory with a distinctive and loud territorial song – a series of short notes ending in a terminal flourish, and rendered 'chip chip chip tell tell tell cherry-erry-erry tissi cheweeo'. This song is repeated persistently from a high perch. Each male has a slightly different call, and regional song dialects have established through New Zealand. The ordinary call note is a metallic 'pink' or 'chwink-chwink', and the flight call is a soft 'tsip'.

Feeding: Diet is a mix of seeds, invertebrates and fruits. The main seeds eaten are cereals and brassicas, weeds such as redroot and fat hen, and pine seeds from the ground or pulled from newly opened cones. Invertebrates, such as spiders, caterpillars, moths, flies and aphids, are most important in the breeding season, and chicks are fed mainly caterpillars. Small fruits of native shrubs and trees are

eaten. They sometimes cause minor damage to newly sown cereal crops and to fruit buds, but rarely damage commercial fruit crops. Chaffinches mainly feed on the ground, walking about with short quick steps. They are sometimes seen hawking for insects above streams and riverbeds, or on the outer parts of conifers.

In the hand: Sexes are easily told by head and breast colours, and males are larger than females: wing 78–86–92 mm cf. 76–81–88 mm. Only adults moult primaries and tail feathers in autumn. First-winter males have dark grey alula, primary coverts and occasional greater coverts contrasting with the black inner greater coverts. In females, the contrast is less obvious. Adults of both sexes have more rounded outer tail feathers than juveniles, and often have a black centre near the tip of the central tail feathers.

Reading: Jenkins, P.F. & Baker, A.J. 1984. *Ibis* 126: 510–524. Sibson, R.B. 1983. *Notornis* 30: 70–72.