Male Zebra Finch red bill, black eye-stripe and orange facial patch at the Soudan Rest Area on the Barkly Highway, NT.

Female Zebra Finch lacks the male's orange facial patch and has a plainer body.

Male and female Zebra Finch (Taeniopygia guttata) have stubby orange-red bills and blue-grey heads with a black "tear" stripe below the eye separated by a whitish stripe from the bill. The rump is white and the tail barred white and dark brown/black. Females have a pale brown back and white underside. Males have round orange patches behind and below the eyes, fine black and white barring on the chest and orange-chestnut flanks spotted with white. Eye, bill and feet are orange-red. Reaches 10 centimetres in length. Immature Zebra Finches are similar to females in colouring with black bill, grey-brown eyes, grey feet.

There are 18 species of native grass-finches in Australia; this is the most widespread. Seen in pairs, small parties or very large flocks, especially coming to water. They are found on dry short grassland and paddocks of spinifex with shrubs and small trees. The grass provides grain for food while shrubs and trees provide shelter and nest sites. Mainly seed-eaters, they forage on the ground for fallen seed, rarely taking seed from low-hanging plants. Insects are also taken on the ground and in flight; insects are taken more often when feeding young.

Found mainly in arid zones, the Zebra Finch has adapted to the dry environment with a lower metabolic rate than other finches reducing water use and loss; they also excrete less water and can drink brackish water not tolerated by other birds. But, they are seed-eating birds which need to drink regularly, preferably every one or two hours.
The need for regular access to water leads to Zebra Finches remaining close to water; establishing watering point for stock, as well as irrigation projects, appears to have increased the numbers and range of Zebra Finches substantially since before European settlement. Zebra Finches are social birds, living in flocks of 10 to 100 or more year round, even staying in a group while breeding; where habitats are limited up to a dozen pairs will nest in the same shrub. The flock feeds during the morning hopping around on the ground (with feet together) picking up fallen seeds, mostly of grasses. In late afternoon flock gathers at a central watering point where they drink, bathe, preen one another and huddle together on perches.

Pairs mate permanently and stay together all year, roosting together and with others in communal roost nests - either old breeding nests or specially built small round structures. Breeding takes place in most months, especially after rain which triggers a breeding frenzy of multiple broods. The male selects several possible nest sites and the female selects the one to be used. The male brings grass stems for the nest and the female does the building, first a platform, then the walls and roof and finally the entrance tunnel to form a flask-shaped nest with a spherical nest chamber 120 to 200 millimetres in diameter, lined with feathers and down; a side entrance tunnel is 50 to 250 millimetres long. The nest is finished in one to two weeks, built of small branches and twigs of bushes and low trees; sometimes in hollows or on the ground.

Four or five (sometimes seven) eggs are laid; pure white; oval about 11 by 15 millimeters. Incubated for 12 to 14 days by both parents who take one to two-hour shifts by day calling to one another to change over. Both sleep in the nest at night. The young fledge in about three weeks and, after fledging, are led back to the nest by their parents to roost until they are abandoned by their parents. The young are independent after 10 days, gain adult plumage in nine to ten weeks and are able to breed then. To cope with the hostile environment Zebra Finches breed when the opportunity arises the only exceptions being drought and cold winters.

Similar Species. The Zebra Finch is not readily confused with any other species. Also found in part of Indonesia (Lesser Sunda Islands). There are two races; one in Australia.