

Common chaffinch

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The **common chaffinch** (*Fringilla coelebs*), usually known simply as the **chaffinch**, is a common and widespread small passerine bird in the finch family. The male is brightly coloured with a blue-grey cap and rust-red underparts. The female is much duller in colouring but both sexes have two contrasting white wings-bars and white sides to the tail. The male bird has a strong voice and sings from exposed perches to attract a mate.

The chaffinch breeds in much of Europe, across Asia to Siberia and in northwest Africa. It prefers open woodland and often forages on the ground. The female builds a nest with a deep cup in the fork of a tree. The clutch is typically 4–5 eggs, which hatch in about 13 days. The chicks fledge in around 14 days but are fed by both adults for several weeks after leaving the nest. The chaffinch is a partial migrant; birds breeding in warmer regions are sedentary while those breeding in the colder northern areas of its range winter further south.

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Taxonomy

The chaffinch was described by Linnaeus in 1758 in the 10th edition of his *Systema Naturae* under its current binomial name.^[3] *Fringilla*

Common chaffinch



Male Birdsong



Female - Both at Otmoor, Oxfordshire

Conservation status



Least Concern (IUCN 3.1)^[1]

Scientific classification

Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Aves
Order:	Passeriformes
Family:	Fringillidae
Subfamily:	Fringillinae
Genus:	<i>Fringilla</i>
Species:	<i>F. coelebs</i>

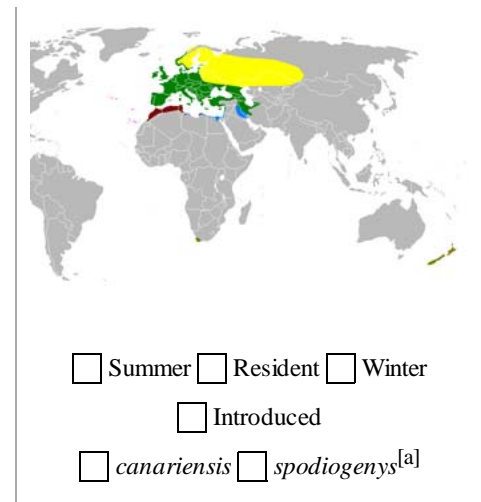
Binomial name

Fringilla coelebs

Linnaeus, 1758

is the Latin word for a finch while *coelebs* means unmarried or single. Linnaeus remarked that during the Swedish winter, only the female birds migrated south through Belgium to Italy.^{[3][4]} The English name comes from the Old English *ceaffinc*, where *ceaf* is "chaff" and *finc* "finch".^[5]

The finch family, Fringillidae, is divided into two subfamilies, the Carduelinae, containing around 28 genera with 141 species and the Fringillinae containing a single genus, *Fringilla*, with 3 species: the chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), the blue chaffinch (*Fringilla teydea*), and the brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*). The finch family are all seed-eaters with stout conical bills. They have similar skull morphologies, nine large primaries, twelve tail feathers and no crop. In all species the female bird builds the nest, incubates the eggs and broods the young. Fringilline finches raise their young almost entirely on arthropods while the cardueline finches raise their young on regurgitated seeds.^[6]



Subspecies

A number of subspecies of the chaffinch have been described based principally on the differences in the pattern and colour of the adult male plumage. The list of subspecies can be divided into three groups: the "*coelebs* group" that occurs in Europe and Asia, the "*spondiogenys* group" in North Africa and the "*canariensis* group" on the Canary Islands.^[7] The subspecies from Madeira and the Azores are placed either in the "*canariensis* group"^[8] or in the "*spondiogenys* group".^[7] Genetic studies indicate that members of the "*coelebs* group" and the "*spondiogenys* group" are more closely related to each other than they are to members of the "*canariensis* group".^{[9][10]}

Within the "*spondiogenys* group" the gradual clinal variation over the large geographic range and the extensive intergradation means that the geographical limits and acceptance of the various subspecies varies between authorities. The International Ornithologists' Union lists eleven subspecies from this group,^[11] whereas Collar et al. (2010) in the Handbook of Birds of the World list seven and consider the features of the subspecies *balearica* (Mallorca), *caucasica* (southern Caucasus), *schiebeli* (southern Greece, Crete and western Turkey), and *tyrrhenica* (Corsica) to fall within the variation of the nominate subspecies. They also suggest that the subspecies *alexandrovi*, *sarda*, *solomkoi*, and *syriaca* may represent variations of the nominate subspecies.^[7]

Suárez et al. (2009) used mitochondrial and nuclear DNA markers in a study of the three subspecies of *Fringilla coelebs* that are currently recognised on the Canary Islands. The authors concluded that the common chaffinches on the islands are sufficiently distinct in both genotype and phenotype to be considered as a separate species within the *Fringilla* genus. They also proposed a revised distribution of subspecies on the islands in which the birds on La Palma (*palmae*) and El Hierro (*ombrioso*) are grouped together as a single subspecies while the current *canariensis* subspecies is split into two with one subspecies occurring only on Gran Canaria and the other on La Gomera and Tenerife.^[12]

Subspecies^[b]			
Subspecies	Authority^[13]	Range	Comments
coelebs group			
<i>F. c. alexandrovi</i>	Zarudny, 1916 ^[14]	Northern Iran	
<i>F. c. caucasica</i>	Serebrovski, 1925	Balkans and northern Greece to northern Turkey, central and eastern Caucasus and northwestern Iran	
<i>F. c. coelebs</i>	Linnaeus, 1758	Eurasia, from western Europe and Asia Minor to Siberia	The nominate subspecies.
<i>F. c. balearica</i>	von Jordans, 1923 ^[15]	Iberian Peninsula and the Balearic Islands	
<i>F. c. gengleri</i>	O. Kleinschmidt, 1909 ^[16]	British Isles	Male plumage resembles nominate but slight darker mantle and underparts ^{[7][17]}
<i>F. c. sarda</i>	Rapine, 1925 ^[18]	Sardinia	
<i>F. c. schiebeleri</i>	Erwin Stresemann, 1925 ^[19]	Southern Greece, Crete and western Turkey	
<i>F. c. solomkoi</i>	Menzbier & Sushkin, 1913 ^[20]	Crimean Peninsula and southwestern Caucasus	
<i>F. c. syriaca</i>	J. M. Harrisson, 1945 ^[21]	Cyprus, southeastern Turkey to northern Iran and Jordan	
<i>F. c. transcaspia</i>	Zarudny, 1916 ^[14]	Northeastern Iran and southwestern Turkmenistan	
<i>F. c. tyrrhenica</i>	Schiebel, 1910 ^[22]	Corsica	
spondiogenys group			
<i>F. c. africana</i>	J. Levaillant, 1850 ^[23]	Morocco to northwestern Tunisia, northeastern Libya	Male plumage: blue-grey of crown and nape extends down to side of head and neck, black forehead and lore, broken white eye-ring, bright olive-green saddle, pink-buff throat and breast. ^{[7][24]}

<i>F. c. spodiogenys</i>	Bonaparte, 1841 ^[25]	Eastern Tunisia and northwestern Libya	Atlas chaffinch Male plumage: similar to previous but paler throat and breast. ^{[7][24]}
canariensis group			
<i>F. c. canariensis</i> (syn. <i>F. c. tintillon</i>)	Vieillot, 1817 ^[26]	Central Canary Islands (La Gomera, Tenerife and Gran Canaria)	Male plumage: Crown to back deep slate-blue, rump bright green. ^{[7][24]}
<i>F. c. maderensis</i>	Sharpe, 1888 ^[27]	Madeira	Madeiran chaffinch
<i>F. c. moreletti</i>	Pucheran, 1859 ^[28]	Azores	
<i>F. c. ombriosa</i>	Hartert, 1913 ^[29]	El Hierro, Canary Islands	
<i>F. c. palmae</i>	Tristram, 1889 ^[30]	La Palma, Canary Islands	La Palma chaffinch

Description

The chaffinch is about 14.5 cm (5.7 in) long, with a wingspan of 24.5–28.5 cm (9.6–11.2 in) and a weight of 18–29 g (0.63–1.02 oz).^[8] The adult male of the nominate subspecies has a black forehead and a blue-grey crown, nape and upper mantle. The rump is a light olive-green; the lower mantle and scapulars form a brown saddle. The side of head, throat and breast are a dull rust-red merging to a pale creamy-pink on the belly. The central pair of tail feathers are dark grey with a black shaft streak. The rest of the tail is black apart from the two outer feathers on each side which have white wedges.^[31] Each wing has a contrasting white panel on the coverts and a buff-white bar on the secondaries and inner primaries.^[8] The flight feathers are black with white on the basal portions of the vanes. The secondaries and inner primaries have pale yellow fringes on the outer web whereas the outer primaries have a white outer edge.^[31]


After the autumn moult the tips of the new feathers have a buff fringe that adds a brown cast to the coloured plumage. The ends of the feathers wear away over the winter so that by the spring breeding season the underlying brighter colours are displayed.^{[31][32]} The eyes have dark brown irises and the legs are grey-brown. In winter the bill is a pale grey and slightly darker along the upper ridge or culmen, but in spring the bill becomes bluish-grey with a small black tip.^[33]

The adult female is much duller in appearance than the male. The head and most of upperparts are shades of grey-brown. The underparts are paler. The lower back and rump are a dull olive green. The wings and tail are similar to those of the male. The juvenile resembles the female.^[17]

Voice

The powerful song is very well known, and its *fink* or *vink* sounding call gives the finch family its English name. Males typically sing two or three different song types, and there are regional dialects too.^[34]

The acquisition by the young chaffinch of its song was the subject of an influential study by British ethologist William Thorpe. Thorpe determined that if the chaffinch is not exposed to the adult male's song during a



"Birdsong at Carrington Moss"

0:00 MENU

A lapwing and a chaffinch at Carrington Moss, in England

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certain critical period after hatching, it will never properly learn the song. He also found that in adult chaffinches, castration eliminates song, but injection of testosterone induces such birds to sing even in November, when they are normally silent.^{[35][36]}

Distribution and habitat

The chaffinch breeds in wooded areas where the July isotherm is between 12 and 30 °C (54 and 86 °F).^[37] The breeding range includes northwest Africa, most of Europe and extends eastwards across temperate Asia to the Angara River and the southern end of Lake Baikal in Siberia. There are also a number of distinctive subspecies on the Azores, the Canary Islands and the Madeira Islands in the Atlantic Ocean.^[7] The chaffinch was introduced from Britain into several of its overseas territories in the 19th century. In New Zealand the chaffinch has colonised both the North and South Islands and is now one of the most common passerine species.^[38] In South Africa a very small breeding colony in the suburbs of Constantia, Hout Bay and Camps Bay in Cape Town is the only remnant of another such introduction.^[39]

Behaviour

This bird is not migratory in the milder parts of its range, but vacates the colder regions in winter. This species forms loose flocks outside the breeding season, sometimes mixed with Bramblings. This bird occasionally strays to eastern North America, although some sightings may be escapees.

The main food of the chaffinch is seeds, but unlike most finches, the young are fed extensively on insects, and adults also eat insects in the breeding season.^[40]

Breeding

Chaffinches first breed when they are one year old. They are mainly monogamous and the pair-bond for residential subspecies such as *gengleri* sometimes persists from one year to the next.^[41] The date for breeding is dependent on the spring temperature and is earlier in southwest Europe and later in the northeast. In Britain most clutches are laid between late April and the middle of June. A male attracts a female to his territory through song.

Nests are built entirely by the female and are usually located in the fork of a bush or a tree several metres above the ground.^[42] The nest has a deep cup and is lined with a layer of thin roots and feathers. The outside is covered with a layer of lichen and spider silk over an inner layer of moss and grass. The eggs are laid in early morning at daily intervals until the clutch is complete.^[43] The clutch is typically 4–5 eggs which are smooth and slightly glossy but very variable in colour. They range from pale-blueish green to light red with purple brown blotches, spots or streaks. The average size of an egg is 19 mm × 15 mm (0.75 in × 0.59 in) with a weight of 2.2 g (0.078 oz). The eggs are incubated for 10–16 days by the female.^[42] The chicks are altricial, hatching nearly naked with closed eyes, and are fed by both parents but mainly by the female who broods them for around six days.^[44] They are mainly fed caterpillars. The nestlings fledge 11–18 days after hatching and disperse. The young birds are then assisted with feeding by both parents for a further three weeks. The parents only very rarely start a second brood, but when they do so it is always in a new nest.^[42]

In a study carried out in Britain using ring-recovery data, the survival rate for juveniles in their first year was 53 per cent, and the adult annual survival rate was 59 per cent.^[45] From these figures the typical lifespan is only three years,^[46] but the maximum age recorded is 15 years and 6 months for a bird in Switzerland.^[47]



Eggs of *Fringilla coelebs moreletti*

Predators and parasites

The eggs and nestlings of the chaffinch are predated by crows, red and grey squirrels, domestic cats and probably also by stoats and weasels. Clutches begun later in the spring suffer less predation, an effect that is believed to be due to the increased vegetation making nests more difficult to find.^[48]

The protozoal parasite *Trichomonas gallinae* was known to infect pigeons and raptors but beginning in Britain in 2005, carcasses of dead European greenfinches and chaffinches were found to be infected with the parasite.^[49] The disease spread and in 2008 infected carcasses were found in Norway, Sweden and Finland and a year later in Germany. The spread of the disease is believed to have been mediated by chaffinches as large numbers of the birds breed in northern Europe and winter in Britain.^[50] In Britain the number of infected carcasses recovered each year declined after a peak in 2006. There was a reduction in the number of greenfinches but no significant decline in the overall number of chaffinches.^[51] A similar pattern occurred in Finland where, after the arrival of the disease in 2008, there was a reduction in the number of greenfinches but only a small change in the number of chaffinches.^[52]

Chaffinches can develop tumors on their feet and legs caused by the *Fringilla coelebs* papillomavirus.^{[53][54]} The size of the papillomas range from a small nodule on a digit to a large growth involving both the foot and the leg. The disease is uncommon: in a 1973 study undertaken in the Netherlands, of around 25,000 chaffinches screened only 330 bore papillomas.^[53]

Status

The chaffinch has an extensive range, estimated at 7 million square kilometres (3.7 million square miles) and a large population including an estimated 130–240 million breeding pairs in Europe. Allowing for the birds breeding in Asia, the total population lies between 530–1,400 million individuals. There is no evidence of any serious overall decline in numbers, so the species is classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature as being of Least Concern.^[55]

The endemic subspecies on the Macaronesian islands in the Atlantic are vulnerable to the loss of habitat, especially *F. c. ombriosa* on El Hierro in the Canary Islands where the breeding population is between 1000-5000 pairs.^[56]

Relationship to humans

The chaffinch is a popular pet bird in some European countries. In Belgium, the ancient traditional sport of vinkenzetting pits male chaffinches against one another in a contest for the most bird calls in an hour.^[57]

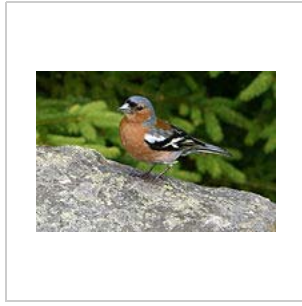
William Turner described the chaffinch in his book on birds published in 1544. The book is in Latin but he gives two English folk names: *sheld-appel* and *spink*.^[58] The word *sheld* is a dialectal word meaning pied or multicoloured (as in Shelduck).^[59] Appel may be related to *Alp*, an obsolete word for a bullfinch.^{[60][61]} The name *spink* is probably derived from the bird's call note. The names *spink* and *shell apple* are among the many folk names listed for the chaffinch by Reverend Charles Swainson in his *Provincial Names and Folk Lore of British Birds* (1885).^[60]

The chaffinch is depicted in a marginal decoration of the 15th century English illuminated manuscript the Sherborne Missal.^{[62][63]}

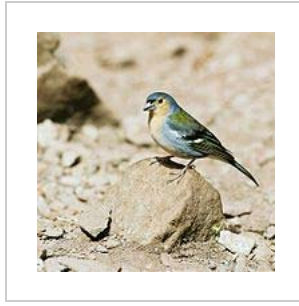
Gallery



Detailed image of female



Male



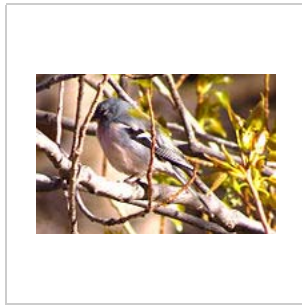
Madeiran chaffinch



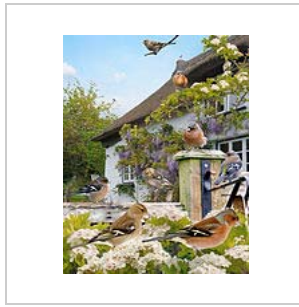
Male



Eating caterpillar



Atlas chaffinch (*F. c. africana*), male



ID composite

Notes

- Distribution map compiled from Snow & Perrins *Birds of the Western Palearctic*,^[2] Harrison *An Atlas of the Birds of the Western Palearctic*, and Clement et al. *Finches & Sparrows*.
- The choice of subspecies with their geographic range are those published by the International Ornithologists' Union.^[11]

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External links

- *Fringilla coelebs* (<http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/species.jsp?lang=EN&avibaseid=37F522810CADE42A>) on Avibase (<http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org>)
- Madeira Birds (http://www.madeirabirds.com/chaffinch_page)
- Internet Bird Collection (<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/species/common-chaffinch-fringilla-coelebs>)
- Ageing and sexing (PDF; 3.6 MB) by Javier Blasco-Zumeta & Gerd-Michael Heinze (http://aulaenred.ibercaja.es/wp-content/uploads/426_ChaffinchFcoelebs.pdf)



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- Feathers of Common Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*) (http://www.ornithos.de/Ornithos/Feather_Collection/Fringilla_coelebs/Fringilla_coelebs.htm)
- Vocalisations on Xeno-canto (<http://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Fringilla-coelebs>)
- Video and audio media for the Common Chaffinch (http://macaulaylibrary.org/search?media_collection=1&taxon_id=12029142&taxon_rank_id=76&q=Common+Chaffinch+%28Common%29), Cornell Lab of Ornithology: Macaulay Library.

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