First record of Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* in Arabian Peninsula

by Brian S. Meadows

**Abstract:** First record of Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* at Jubail al-Sinaiyah in eastern Saudi Arabia in winter 1994/95.

**Kurzfassung:** Erster Nachweis des Kernbeißers *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* bei Jubail al-Sinaiyah in Osten von Saudi Arabien im Winter 1994/95.

**Key words:** Hawfinch, *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*, Arabian Peninsula, zoogeography.

The record

On 27 December 1994, at 07.30 hours, while making a daily walk through the landscaped area around an administration centre serving the light industrial park at Jubail al-Sinaiyah in eastern Saudi Arabia, a Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* was disturbed from the canopy of a tall leguminous tree *Prosopis juliflora* by a pedestrian approaching in my direction. The bird flew out of the tree and approached directly towards me. As it flew pass me to within a few meters, I had an excellent view of the bird; it continued on, crossed a road and disappeared over into an adjacent plot.

Several weeks later, on 7 February 1995, what was presumed to be the same bird, was seen again and it remained in the area until 18 March 1995. In between, I was able to relocate the bird on 13, 14, 20, 22, 26 and 27 February and 11 March - usually, initially, by its call. On each occasion I had adequate to very good views of the bird, either unaided or using 7 x 50 or 8 x 21 binoculars. Once I was able to look down on the bird from the roof of a building, twice it was seen perched on a fence and once on the ground. The majority of observations were between 07.00 - 08.00 hours but twice as late as midday, including penultimate sighting.

**General appearance, behaviour and structure**

It was unmistakable. A large stumpy square-tailed finch with large conical bill. Thick-neck and large head giving a silhouette resembling a diminutive parrot. It had a distinctively marked wing pattern in flight - broad white bar and white centres to primaries. It flew in a brisk bounding cum undulating manner in direct path. Initial take off with rapid wing beats. Upward swoop to perch.

Wary but easily located by call. When flushed usually escaped into canopy albeit sometimes perching on an exposed branch; twice it landed on the top of a fence and once it was seen flying down on the ground to search for food where it moved around in a very erect manner.
Plumage. Upperparts: cinnamon-brown, slightly darker on back and greyer on nape and gingery-yellow on crown and upper nape. Latter well-demarcated, making crown and upper nape sharply defined from rest of upper parts i.e. a forming distinct cap.

Tail was dark cinnamon brown, relatively short, square ended with indistinct notched tip. All tail feathers broadly tipped white - very noticable, even at some distance. Side - edges of tail were black, becoming broader towards tip and forming a black triangular pattern.

Lower forehead (above bill) and lores to below eye were black.

Flight feathers were blackish but inner primaries and secondaries showed purplish gloss when seen at close range and in good light conditions.

Distinct and relatively large off-white blaze on coverts, visible at rest as well as in flight a white wing-bar at base of primaries was also visible.

Underparts: black chin and throat. Otherwise breast and belly a highly faded brown (slightly paler on breast).

Bare parts. Bill was relatively massive, angular with sharp point, deep and broad at base. Dull yellowish in December but by February (assuming same bird) had definitely become bluish, particularly at tip of upper mandible. From February onwards to date of final sighting, in mid-March, it was entirely blue and had changed from a pale blue to medium-blue. Legs relatively short - pale brown.

Voice. A sharp powerful clipped 'tic', which was usually repeated after a few seconds, was always given in flight often in cover. In cover a shrill 'tee' was once uttered.

Several species of trees that have been planted for landscaping purposes were fruiting heavily and could have provided suitable seeds for the Hawfinch, particularly those contained in the pods of Prosopsis. The latter was the most favoured tree seen to be visited but it also regularly frequented Ziziphus trees and occasionally others, including Ficus. Once I saw the bird try to catch a flying ant.

The bird was generally un molested by other species. However, on one occasion it was seen being chased by a White-checked Bulbul Pycnonotus leucogenys and once by a migrant Red-tailed Shrike Lanius isabellinus. Two House Sparrows Passer domesticus landed adjacent to it on the occasion when I saw it searching for food on the ground - the Hawfinch flinched, flew off and was followed by one of the sparrows in close pursuit.

The large number of sightings in February may have been a result that it was the holy month of Ramadan and there was very little human activity in the business park until after 10.00 hours.

I am familiar with hawfinches from oak-hornbeam woods around London in England.

Discussion

This is the first record of a Hawfinch from the Arabian peninsula. Clement et al. (1993) state that the race nigricans which breeds in Crinea, Caucasus, Ukraine and northern Iran, winters in southern Iran and occurs, erratically (common in some years) in Iraq and the Levant so its occurrence in Saudi Arabia is, therefore not surprising. Its appearance at Jubail also coincided with an influx in the city of several other rarities that breed in parts of the northern Middle East (Symens 1995).
References


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