

Bloedel Bird of the Month – The Red-crested Finch



The Red-crested Finch¹ is a small bird native to woodlands of central South America.² Males are mainly dark red with a cinnamon back and a bright red crest. The crest is usually a thin red line, but can display to form a triangular red crest over the head. Females lack the crest and are mostly dark brown with a brown breast and rump. Both sexes have white rings around their eyes.³ Immature males look like females.

The Latin name is *Coryphospingus cucullatus*. Where ‘*Coryphospingus*’ comes from the Greek ‘koruphe’ (Crown of the head) and ‘spingos’ (finch). The Latin ‘Cucullus’ (hood) gives ‘*Cucullatus*’ (hooded).⁴

With common names of Red-crested Finch and Red pileated Finch, plus a Latin name calling it ‘Hooded, crown of the head finch’, it would be easy to conclude that the bird is a finch. The Finch family is the *Fringillidae*. The Red-crested Finch is, in fact, a member of the *Thraupidae*,⁵ or ‘Tanager family.’ It is a ‘finch-like tanager.’

The famous ‘Darwin’s Finches’ of the Galapagos Islands are also tanagers. Tanagers are all native to the New World, the Western Hemisphere and mainly the tropics. Over millions of years, with environmental changes, parts of South America became perfect for finch-like birds. In the absence of true finches⁶ filling the niche, some tanagers took advantage of the conditions.

Convergent evolution⁷ produced birds from these tanagers that look very much like finches. In recent decades, DNA studies have had birds and plants move families. Family classification is now based on genes not just appearance.⁸

The best habitat for the Red-crested Finch is arid scrub and dry deciduous forest.⁹ Red-crested Finches eat mainly fruit, but will add insects and other invertebrates to their diet. They forage on

¹ Also known at the Red Pileated finch – See: <http://www.oiseaux.net/birds/red.pileated.finch.html>

² Native to Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, and Uruguay. See: <https://dpiwwe.tas.gov.au/wildlife-management/management-of-wildlife/wildlife-imports/species-risk-assessments/red-crested-finch>

³ <https://ebird.org/species/recfin1>

⁴ <http://www.peruaves.org/thraupidae/red-crested-finch-coryphospingus-cucullatus/>

⁵ <http://www.peruaves.org/thraupidae/>

⁶ There are true finches in the Americas, but there were not enough of them in the right place at the right time, leaving a gap filled by tanagers.

⁷ <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-convergent-evolution-1224809>

⁸ The old saying: ‘If it waddles like a duck, quacks like a duck and looks like a duck, chances are, it’s a duck’ should, perhaps, now end with ‘but to be sure, check its DNA.’

the ground, especially along grassy borders and inside woodland.¹⁰

The Red-crested Finch lays two or three eggs. The eggs are completely white which is unusual for tanagers. The only other tanager to lay completely white eggs is its close relative, the Grey Pileated Finch, *Coryphospingus pileatus*,¹¹ the only other member of *Coryphospingus*.

When the bright red crest of the male is not open, or if it does not catch the light, the bird is very inconspicuous. When the crest is open on display, the bright red triangle on the head makes the bird much more visible.



Four Views of
the same male
Red-crested
Finch



⁹ <https://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/Species-Account/nb/species/recfin1/overview>

¹⁰ <https://ezinearticles.com/?Rainforest-Birds---Red-Crested-Finch&id=1052078>

¹¹ http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1984-46702016000400300