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Taeniopygia guttata (Vieillot, 1817) (Avifauna: Passeridae, Estrildidae) establish a semi feral breeding population in Malta.

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ABSTRACT

A population of Zebra Finches *Taeniopygia guttata* is being documented for the first time locally to establish itself in a semi feral state. Other relevant data is given.

Keywords: *Taeniopygia guttata*, semi feral, Maltese Islands.

INTRODUCTION

The Zebra Finch, *Taeniopygia guttata*, is the most common and familiar estrildid finch of Central Australia and ranges over most of the continent, avoiding only the cool moist south and the tropical far north. It also can be found natively in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. The bird has been introduced to various countries including Puerto Rico, Portugal, Brazil and the United States. Zebra Finches are extremely gregarious birds that are never met singly in their native habitat but are always found in groups of several pairs (BirdLife International 2009).

It is believed the first finches were exported to England and Europe during the early 1800s. Earliest records of Zebra finches in captivity date to a German scientist who studied them in the wild in Australia for a year them brought them home to Germany in 1805. By 1872 they were bred routinely in Europe. The earliest documented color mutation is the white zebra finch bred in Australia in the early 1920's.One cannot trace exactly when these finches started being imported in Malta, but what is certain is that this species been bred successfully in considerable numbers in captivity for quite some time. The practice became more popular after World War II and several bird breeders recalled that breeding Zebra Finches became very popular in the 1960s and 1970s. Because of the successful rate of breeding, it is worth mentioning that it is not unusual for captive birds to escape from aviaries, sometimes in large numbers. Many escapees usually end up either caught when they go to feed near other aviaries, or end up dying because they do not find enough adequate food.

Because escapees from captivity are not infrequent, initial reports of single birds and small flocks mostly seen in the Sliema area were not considered noteworthy. Eventually the reports become rather frequent, particularly consisting of flocks, some quite sizeable and mostly in Sliema area known as Qui si sana and Tigne point. Small flocks were also recorded feeding in the St. Julians area on a regular basis. In 2009 one of the authors (MS) was informed by Filippo Corso that he noted various estrildid finches in the gardens of a hotel he was staying at and that they were actually breeding in the gardens. On 27/x/ 2010 one of us (AS) observed at Tigne coast 6 specimens feeding. This species was not recorded in any of the recent local ornithological publications including the monumental works of Fenech(2010) and Baldacchino & Azzopardi(2007). It was also not included in Malta breeding Atlas (2009). So it was decided to investigate.

Local reports and observations

One of the authors (AS) contacted the manager of the Fortina Hotel, Mr Paul Sixsmith who informed us that the birds were released in the hotel gardens in order to establish a colony with the intention to embellish the gardens. The first release was in April 2007. On the first attempt the birds were let free to roam about and many were lost in this way. For the second and third attempt to establish a colony a new strategy was executed. Prior to release, some birds were kept

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for 3 weeks in a cage within the location whilst other birds had their wings trimmed so that they would stay in the gardens, hence acting as decoys to keep the eventually freshly released birds in that area. The birds were restocked for the first year and a half until some established themselves in the location. The birds eventually established themselves and started breeding regularly. They show a preference for palm trees to build their nests but on one occasion one pair nested in an open ventilator. The nest generally consists of an untidy dome made of grass twigs and rootlets and lined with feathers and plant matter.

During our observations we noted that the established colony now consists of over a hundred specimens and they tend to stay in one or two flocks but a few birds formed solitary pairs. The majority stay within the boundary of the garden as they are fed constantly but several specimens were noted outside the area and many flying out and coming back every few minutes. Some were also observed feeding along the coast and they were noted as far as Manuel Island feeding at the ducks village and Tigne point. (AS) was informed by employees that work at Manuel island that in 2009 they found fledglings belonging to this species on tamarisk trees at Manuel Island suggesting that that they bred in the vicinity. (AS) was also informed that they also bred in a private garden adjoining a house close to Fortina Hotel and that they also bred in ventilators facing the garden in 2009. (MS) was informed by various sources that small feeding flocks regularly visit the balconies and gardens at Tigne Point in many instances at close proximity to people. A few preliminary observations by the authors show that this species interacts well with the common populations of *Columba livia* (domest.), *Erithacus rubecula*, *Phoenicurus ochruros*, *Sylvia melanocephala and Passer hispaniolensis* that visit the breeding ground and also the feeding areas, although they do tend to compete with the latter species when it comes to search for food. They only tend to become aggressive when other species go near close proximity of their nest, eggs of fledglings as it was observed repeatedly males *T. Guttata* chasing other males of the same species and both sexes of *P. hispaniolensis.* They also frequently chase *Tarentola mauritanica* and *Podarcis filfolensis* which tend to be attracted to the nest. On 2 occasions the later species was observed scavenging old or abandoned nest feeding on dead fledglings carcasses, a similar behaviour noted on other avifauna nests (Sciberras, 2009).

The species is slowly colonising new locations and most of the population survive the cold winter days on domestic food provided in many locations of the Fortina hotel gardens.

With regards to morphology nearly all domestic breeds' variations including hybrids of these were noted.

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Images: Male (top left), Female white plumage (top middle) female brown plumage (top right)
Juvenile (bottom left) Male feeding chicks (bottom middle) Variations and hybrids females (bottom right) *T. guttata`* main residential habitat (bottom) (Photo credits –A.Sciberras)

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