

THE NUTMEG MANNIKIN IN SUBURBAN ADELAIDE

R. J. WHATMOUGH

Received 6 May 1980; accepted 7 July 1980

The Nutmeg Mannikin *Lonchura punctulata* is native to Asia, ranging there from eastern India to the Philippines. It has been introduced to Australia and has established itself around Sydney and in coastal Queensland (Slater 1974). It now appears to have been feral in Adelaide for several years.

On 20 October 1979 I saw six Nutmeg Mannikins on the banks of the Torrens River near Martin Grove, Paradise, about 9 km NE of the City of Adelaide. In this area, European Ashes *Fraxinus oxycarpa* and Bamboo Grass *Arundo donax* on the river bank meet market gardens, a newly-cleared park and a housing estate. Weeds are sometimes abundant.

The birds were observed for about two minutes, feeding in marshmallows (*Malva* sp.), and grasses in flower and seed, and the following description was taken:

"Unknown finches. Red-brown back, black face. Paler bluish(?) bill, light grey rump. Medium-long pointed black tail. Red-brown throat. Light abdomen with red-brown chevron marks on flanks and red-brown spots on breast. About the size of a House Sparrow. Possibly a thin 'peeo peeo' call."

(Some qualification of this description may be necessary. The tail was "medium-long pointed" in comparison with those of other birds generally, and not like that of, say, the Long-tailed Finch *Poephila acuticauda*. No direct size comparison with any other bird was possible. The calls may have come from European Goldfinches *Carduelis carduelis* in the vicinity.)

Delacour and Mayr (1946) describe the Nutmeg Mannikin as "very variable" and the descriptions by different authors vary widely. The rump colour may be "golden-yellow" (Gangula 1975) or "whitish" (Wildash 1968); the face varies from "chestnut" (Gangula 1975) to very dark (Smythies 1953 illustration). I have identified the Paradise birds on their general appearance and their underside markings, despite some discrepancies in colour.

Other similar species, with reasons for their elimination, were the Pictorella Mannikin *L. pectoralis* (dark rump, lack of red-brown underside markings), Masked Finch *Poephila personata* (yellow bill, black flank patch and lack of other underside markings) and Plum-

headed Finch *Aidemosyne modesta* (rump and whole underside barred).

The October 1979 sighting was not my first of unusual finches along the Torrens River in suburban Adelaide, but the first on which positive identification was possible. Furthermore, the sources referred to above confirm that the habitat described would be suitable.

On 21 November 1976 I recorded a finch in Bamboo Grass in the Torrens River at Highbury, about 2 km NE of the Paradise site. In a brief glimpse, the bird appeared to have a grey, slightly stubby bill, a dark face and a slightly mottled breast with no other outstanding features. Other small birds were present but not seen.

On 26 August 1978 I recorded six finches along the Torrens River near Riverside Drive, Felixstow, about three km SW of the Paradise site. These were feeding in weeds where park lawns and Bamboo grass met on the river bank. (Introduced vegetation is being cleared from this area at the time of writing.) The following description was made during a minute's observation:

"Unknown finches. Red-brown face. Brown above, grey below. Orange and brown in folded wing. Darker about eye, black bill and chin. Flanks flecked in dark brown and white. No (bright) red in plumage. Faint twittering calls."

From these three sightings, it appears that at least one small flock of Nutmeg Mannikins has been present in suburban Adelaide for three years, and that either one flock is wide-ranging or there are other flocks present. Most parts of the Torrens River between Highbury and Felixstow have been visited at least once every two months since the 1976 sighting, so an intensive search over five or ten kilometres of river and many nearby suburbs could be needed to establish the numbers present or to detect any evidence of breeding.

REFERENCES

- Delacour, J. and Mayr, E. 1946. Birds of the Philippines. MacMillan, New York.
 Gangula, U. 1975. A Guide to the Birds of the Delhi Area. Indian Council of Agricultural Research, New Delhi.
 Slater, P. 1974. A Field Guide to Australian Birds — Passerines. Rigby.
 Smythies, B. E. 1953. The Birds of Burma. Oliver and Boyd, London.
 Wildash, P. 1968. Birds of South Vietnam. Charles E. Tuttle Co., Tokyo.