

THE SPICE FINCH



Wild Spice Finch, West Bengal, India
Photo: J.M. Garg

The Spice Finch, *Lonchura punctulata*, also known as the Scaly-breasted Munia, Spotted Munia and Nutmeg Mannikin, is native to tropical Asia extending from India and Sri Lanka east to Indonesia and the Philippines. It has been introduced into many other parts of the world and has established in Puerto Rico and Hispaniola as well as north-eastern Australia and the United States of America. They are found in open habitats including gardens and

agricultural fields where they forage in groups for grass seeds.

The Spice Finch is 11-12cm (4.25"-4.75") in length. Adults have dark stubby beaks, brown upperparts and darker brown head. The underparts are white with black scale markings. The sexes are similar, although males have darker markings on the underside and a darker throat. Immatures are much paler and lack the darker head. They can easily be confused with juveniles of other munias such as the Tricoloured Munia, *Lonchura malacca*.



Juvenile Spice Finch, West Bengal, India
Photo: J.M. Garg

Within their wide distribution range some variations in colour and size occur, about eleven subspecies are recognised. These include the nominate form found on the plains of South Asia (Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka). The name "*lineoventer*" was formerly used for the Indian population. Other populations include *subundulata* of the eastern Himalayas, *yunnanensis* of southern China, *topela* of Thailand, *cabanisi* of the Philippines and *fretensis* of Singapore and Sumatra. Island populations include *nisoria* (Java, Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa), *particeps* (Sulawesi), *baweana* (Bawean Island), *sumbae* (Sumba) and *blasii* (Flores, Timor and Tanimbar).

They are found in a range of habitats but are usually close to water and grassland. In India, they are especially common in paddy fields where they are considered a minor pest on account of their grain feeding. They are found mainly on the plains but are also found in the foothills of the Himalayas, and other mountainous regions, sometimes up to an altitude of 2500m (8200 feet). In Pakistan they are restricted to a narrow region from Swat in the west to Lahore avoiding the desert zone and then occurring again in India east of a line between Ludhiana and Mount Abu. They are rare in Kashmir.



Spice Finch Feeding
West Bengal, India
Photo: J.M. Garg

The Spice Finch is a gregarious bird which feeds mainly on seeds and like some other munias, they occasionally feed on algae. They also take small berries of *Lantana* and other plants. Flocks of up to a hundred birds are sometimes formed. Wing and tail flicking is characteristic of the species. When roosting, they sit in close contact with each other. Spice Finches enjoy allopreening, usually this is limited to just the face and neck. Vocalisation includes a short whistle, variations on *kitty-kitty-kitty* and a sharp chipping alarm note. During their courtship song males sit very erect with the head feathers raised.

The song itself which is very soft, complex, variable and only audible at close range, consists of a series of high notes followed by a croaky rattle and ending in a slurred whistle.

Breeding usually occurs during the rainy season (mainly June to August in India) but can occur at other times. The nest is a large domed structure made of loose grass, bamboo or other leaves with a side entrance and placed in a tree or under the eaves of a house. A study in southern India found the preferred nesting trees to be *Toddalia asiatica*, *Gymnosporia montana* and *Acacia chundra*, especially short bushy ones in areas with low canopy cover. In northern India, they prefer isolated *Acacia nilotica* in non-urban areas but *Thuja orientalis* and *Polyalthia longifolia* in urban areas. A typical clutch consists of four to six pure white eggs, but clutches up to ten have been recorded. Both sexes help build the nest and incubate the eggs. The incubation period is twelve to fourteen days depending on the prevailing temperature.



Acacia chundra

The ease with which these birds can be maintained in captivity has made them a popular species for behavioural and physiological studies. In their natural habitat studies of their foraging techniques have examined the effect of group size on predator vigilance and increased feeding efficiency. The time expended on vigilance is greatest in solitary individuals, but reduces as the group size increases.

Laboratory studies have found that long day illumination and high humidity trigger breeding activity.

The Animal and Plant Control Act prohibits the keeping of Spice Finches in South Australia. Any birds found here will be confiscated and the holder prosecuted.

A PERSONAL NOTE ON THE SPICE FINCH

When resident in Port Moresby in the 1980s I was, for a time, President of the *Papua New Guinea Bird Society*, an ornithological group. As a result I had regular contact with the leading ornithologists in PNG. Imagine therefore my surprise to be told, when I casually mentioned at a society meeting that a pair of Spice Finches were building a nest in my backyard, that Spice Finches had never before been recorded in PNG.

This was, alas, my one and only claim to fame in the world of ornithology.

R.V.C.

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BIRD KEEPING IN AUSTRALIA