

# **THE BLACK-HEADED NUN**

(Prepared from notes of an address given to the Society  
by Mr. Colin McDonough in 1987)

The black-headed nun (*Lonchura malacca atricapilla*) is found within an area which includes north-east India, Bangladesh, Assam and Burma. It is very closely related to the tri-coloured nun (*L. m. malacca*), which inhabits southern India and Sri Lanka; and to the silver-headed nun (*L. maja*) which is found in southern Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra, Java and Bali. A grey-headed nun (*L. caniceps caniceps*) is found in the south-eastern areas of New Guinea.

The *Lonchura* genus belongs to the *Estrildidae* family of wax bills and allies. Birds that we are generally aware of in Australia which are included in the *Lonchura* genus are the African and Indian silverbills, rufous-backed and bronze-winged mannikins and spice finches. Australian finches in this genus are the chestnut-breasted and yellow-rumped finches. It should also be noted that the Bengalese finch is a domesticated bird derived from the white-backed mannikins (*Lonchura striata*).

None of the birds mentioned above should be kept together due to the likelihood of interbreeding, which would not be of benefit to aviculture.

The black-headed nun seems to be surviving in Australian aviaries but it would appear to need more attention to be given to it vis-à-vis the silver-headed and tri-coloured varieties, especially in South Australia. That comment is based upon the fact that firstly there are very few of these birds offered for sale, and secondly, there is very little written information available. These observations indicate that they are not being kept in large numbers in this State.

I have only kept the black-headed nuns once, quite a few years ago. I had little, if any success with them which, in retrospect, was probably because they were not correctly housed. They were kept in an aviary 4.25m long x 1.2m wide and 2.1m high and which included several pairs of other types of finches. Similar experiences were recorded with tri-coloureds and silver-headed until recently when I placed the silver-headed nuns into a large planted aviary with immediate success. Theoretically, the black-headed, as well as the tri-coloured would also be better suited to these conditions, (i.e. in a colony system of 6 birds housed in a large type planted aviary with plenty of brush and, if possible seed type grasses being available). There are two reasons why a colony system may be appropriate:

- They appear to be a species of birds which likes to 'flock' together; and
- they are difficult to sex and there is a better chance of getting compatible pairs of birds in a colony system.

As to the benefit of a larger aviary, it was noted that the birds were very nervous in the smaller aviary, disappearing into the shelter very quickly should someone enter the backyard. The planted aviary allows them to keep out of sight, should they feel the need, but more importantly gives them a feeling of security which, in turn, induces them to go to nest.

I found that for nesting sites, the birds on occasions chose shrubs in the aviary but appeared to prefer brush provided in darker and sheltered areas of the aviary.

As mentioned earlier sexing is not easy but perhaps the best guides being that the hen has:

- a narrower and smaller beak,
- a smaller head, and
- is possible more nervous than the cock bird.

The birds are generally black over the entire head, neck and upper chest area and in an area extending from the centre of the abdomen to the vent. Elsewhere, the bird is a rich chestnut brown.

To me, a diet of seed alone does not seem appropriate. The nuns do not go for livefood, so perhaps to bring the birds into top condition for breeding a diet which includes plain cake, seeding grasses, silverbeet, soaked seed, Wombaroo mix, cuttlefish and a vitamin mix should be considered.

Nuns also like to bathe often and should have the facility to do that in all types of weather.

For nest construction, the nuns prefer a coarse grass for the outer part of the nest, finer grass for the inner part and a lining of animal hair or vegetable fibre. It is advisable to provide both green and dry grasses to the birds. Feathers appear to be seldom used, but there is no harm in providing them. The cock bird collects the material while the hen builds the nest. They will lay 1-5 eggs which will be incubated for 12-15 days. The young can be expected to remain in the nest for 21-28 days after hatching, being fed by the parents for a further 6- 7 weeks after fledging. It may take up to 7 months for

the dull brown young birds to gain full colour. When young birds are in the nest, interference with the nest must be kept to a minimum as the nuns are relatively timid birds who may abandon their young upon human interference.

I would again stress the fact that very little information has been written about the nuns. It would be worthwhile if other experiences with any of the nuns could be documented for publication in this magazine.