

THE FOREIGN NUN FAMILY IN AUSTRALIAN COLLECTIONS

By John Williams

When I considered writing an article on foreign Nuns for *Bird Keeping in Australia* I thought I should do some reading first and initially referred to Goodwin's excellent book **Estrildid Finches Of The World** (1988). I have browsed through this book many times over the years and on occasions when writing or speaking on a particular subject have derived much information from this source, particularly about the bird's native origin. I was somewhat surprised to see that Goodwin's section on Nuns, "**The munias or mannikins, Java Sparrow and Pictorella Finch**", covers 45 pages (of A4 print) and describes 33 munias, spread over the Oriental and Australasian region. Easier reading was Mark Shephard's **Aviculture in Australia** and Russell Kingston's authoritative publication **Keeping and Breeding Finches and Seed-Eaters**.

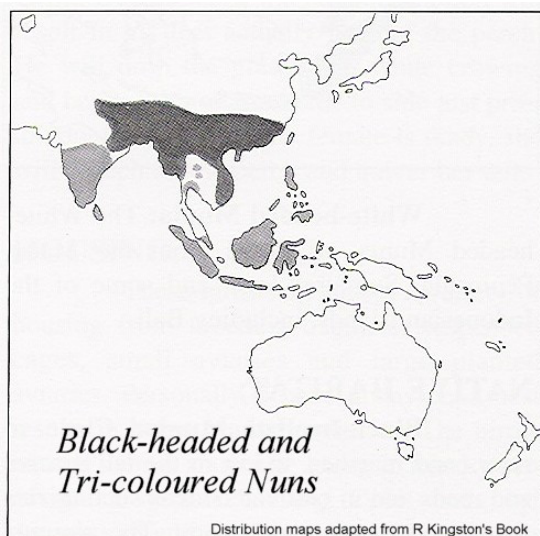
It is generally recognised that there are three of the foreign Nuns held in Australian collections – the Silver-headed Nun, the Tri-coloured Nun and the Black-headed Nun. It is some-what surprising that more are not established in Australia given the number of species there are and the success of the three that are established.

NATIVE DISTRIBUTION

Silver-headed Nuns occur from southern



regions of Thailand through the Malay Peninsula and to islands of Indonesia, including Sumatra, Java and Bali.



Tri-coloured Nuns are birds of the Indian continent and Sri Lanka.

Black-headed Nuns are the most widely distributed of the three, in the north-east of their range from southern China and Taiwan, from Nepal and eastern Pakistan in the west down through Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra,

Borneo and through to the Philippines.

Kingston reports that Black-headed Nuns have been introduced into other south-east Asian countries and into New Guinea, and of colonies being in New South Wales and Queensland in the 1930's.

NATIVE HABITAT

White-headed Nuns occur in reed beds, grassy places and cultivated areas, including rice fields, gardens and in towns and villages.

Both the Black-headed and Tri-coloured Nuns inhabit rivers and marshes where there are tall grasses and reeds, and rice fields and sugar-cane crops.

Areas where these Nuns occur are subject to high rainfall, particularly during the monsoonal wet seasons. Temperatures range from 15 degrees up to 45 degrees.

DESCRIPTIONS

Silver-headed Nun

As the common name implies, this Nun has the entire head an off-white or cream colour. The mantle, back and wings are a dull chestnut brown. The breast is a pale greyish colour tending to blend into the dark brown underparts. The rump and upper tail feathers are a dark chestnut. The bill is silver grey and the legs bluish grey.



Tri-coloured Nun



The entire head down to the breast and the belly is black. The mantle, back and wings are reddish brown as are the rump and tail feathers. The lower breast and flanks are white. The bill is silver grey and the legs bluish grey.



Black-headed Nun

The entire head down to the breast is black and this can extend down to the belly and underparts. The rest of the body is a rich chocolate brown. The bill is silver grey and the legs bluish grey. Kingston rightly describes that the extent of black on the belly and underparts varies and you will see this in the birds in your collection, pointing to the possibility of sub-species mixing in our populations of Black-headed Nuns.

All the Nuns are very neat in appearance once moulting through their juvenile plumage and being in full feather, seeming to be good specimens for the show bench. Their upright stance contrasts nicely with the “across the

perch” stance of some other species.

Juveniles of the three Nuns are generally light brown overall – you could compare the extent of colour change from juveniles to adults as similar to the change in our Gouldian finch. They can take many months to moult into full adult colour and this tends to mean you have to hold young for longer than a lot of other birds.

VISUAL SEXING

The easy way to sex Nuns is to assume that every bird that crows or sings is a male – however, you may get an occasional young hen that crows. Head shape and size is another method, where the male is generally larger and the hen smaller and more rounded. The bill size can be used – the male is bolder, rounded on top while the female’s is more slender and pointed. Under the bill the male tends to have a pointed reach into the feathers where the female is more u-shaped and wider. Older females tend to a duller version of themselves when they have been through the breeding season.

FEEDING

Nuns feed on the seeds of various grasses in the wild, taken from growing vegetation and from the ground. Cultivated rice is taken, although Goodwin reports that White-headed Nuns may not be able to cope with fully ripe rice seeds. As with a number of other finch species you will notice in your own aviary situation they are very adept at hanging on tall grass stems and feeding on the seeds from the top of the stem.

There are some birds that will just not feed in this fashion, only taking their food from the ground and seed bowl.

IN CAPTIVITY

I have not had any experience keeping the Tri-coloured Nun but over the years have kept and bred the other two. Currently I have two colonies of Black-headed Nuns.

I can relate here my lack of experience in keeping the Tri-coloured Nun in the hope it will save another aviculturist from a mistake I once made. Many years ago I won a pair of these birds in a raffle and as I had to go to work the next morning I left them in the carry box, with plenty of seed and water, and put them on the bench in the shed. When I arrived home from work late in the afternoon the next day, I went to the shed only to notice that the sun was beating down right across the wire front of the box – the day had been extremely hot and even though the birds still had water in the box they had died from the heat. They were in the shade in the morning and I hadn't thought anything further. To this day I check carry-boxes a number of times after I release birds from them in case I make a similar stupid mistake. Since that day I haven't acquired any Tri-coloured Nuns.

I have had Silver-headed Nuns on and off over the years, always in multiple pairs in an aviary. I have not had good success in breeding these birds, but the times when I have had them in my collection was the period when parrots were my principal interest and the finches didn't get an appropriate amount of attention.

Several years ago I saw a small colony of Black-headed Nuns while buying some finches from a fellow aviculturist. He remarked that he bought some Nuns from New South Wales because he couldn't find a source of these birds in South Australia – his original importation coloured up to be cross-breeds but the next year he imported “pure” stock and these were the birds I saw plus their young. I hadn't seen too many Black-headed Nuns in my visits to aviaries so I purchased three pair from him and these, plus another three pair I bought at the Gunnedah bird sale in 2003, are the source of my current stock.

In the aviary, a good well-balanced diet should be provided. I provide a dry seed mix that mainly comprises white millet (6 parts), 2 parts canary seed and one part each of Japanese millet, red and white panicum. In a lot of articles you read the authors report that red panicum is one of the main seeds taken but in my own collection when I winnow the bowl of seed in any of the aviaries, red panicum remains in a greater proportion to the other seeds than originally provided. As a separate mix I have a small bowl of Peppers Grains and Greens to which in the winter months I add a small amount of some of the black oil seeds (rape, niger, maw) and hulled oats. Grains and Greens are fairly expensive, but all of my finches take these seeds and

some seem to have a preference for them, particularly when fresh seed is added each weekend. There is a voice of opinion that says birds should be fed a very basic diet in the winter (non breeding) months – an austerity diet that is enough to sustain the bird (say only the millets and occasional greens), which is then expanded to the full feeding regime to bring the birds into full breeding condition, as happens in the wild.

The normal additions are always available – fresh water each day, fine shell-grit and cuttlefish. I cut the cuttlefish into small squares and thread onto a length of wire which is then hung on the wire in the outside flight part of the aviary – I noticed years ago that birds tended to perch on the large pieces of cuttlefish which after a while became covered in droppings. This doesn't happen now.

Seeding grasses or silver beet is provided virtually every day and sweet-corn a couple of times a week. All the clippings from the back lawn are spread in the aviaries, usually weekly in the summer but less so in winter and you can be assured most birds will be down on this before you have a chance to exit the aviary. Nuns are one of the finches in the aviary that attack vegetation the most so an aviary with established plantings would be ideal before you purchased them. However, they certainly do not need a planted aviary to successfully breed.

All the aviaries are provided with gents every morning – on the very few occasions I run out of gents mealworms are provided. Gents seem to now have become the preferred live food source for finches, replacing termites, and are very easy to breed (in the back shed where the wife and daughter won't go). I notice though that the Nuns hardly ever go to the live food – unless they hold back until I'm gone and are in the second wave of feeders.

Nuns are a gregarious and social bird and can safely be kept with other finches, whether in single pairs or in colonies. They do not appear to interfere in the lives of any of the other birds they share the aviaries with and therefore make an ideal aviary bird. Personally, I prefer to see the Nuns in an aviary with tall grasses or similar growing plants and you then get an impression of what they must be like in their native habitat. I think this situation is important also to ensure overgrown toe-nails don't develop like they can in this species.

None of the Nuns should be housed together as cross breeding can occur. I would suggest that there are other species that shouldn't share aviaries with Nuns as the same could occur (such as the Yellow-rumped Finch).

Nesting in my aviaries is both inside the house section in dry brush hung on the side walls and outside in growing clumps of bamboo cane. Indeed this is the preferred site for most species, from Orange-breasted Waxbills to Diamond Firetails. The nest is made of coarse grass outside and lined with fine grasses. I have not noticed the

birds carrying feathers to the nest as you would notice Diamonds do when a fresh lot of feathers are provided. Generally numbers I get are two or three young in a nest but with a colony there may be two or three nests fledge together and you can't tell.

GENERAL

Media reporting over the last few years about (illegal) clearing for agricultural purposes in countries just north of Australia does not fill one with hope for the survival in the wild of particular populations, whether they be birds or other creatures. Readers would remember newspaper / television reports over the last couple of years of dense smoke clouds affecting the health of people in countries thousands of kilometres from areas cleared for cultivation by burning. It can only be hoped that relevant organisations are monitoring the local situations and something can be done to ensure the survival of individual species. Meanwhile we must ensure the survival in our avicultural collections of all the species we keep. It seems to me that the Queensland Finch Society has almost taken on this role by default, being the largest and only specialist finch society in Australia, through its excellent monthly magazine and support for protection of wild populations of our native finch species.

If readers are interested to include Nuns in their collections then I suggest that Russell Kingston's book is a must to have, or at least read, as there is a host of information in there to help you be successful with this species.