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## THE TRI-COLOURED MUNIA *Lonchura malacca* IN VENEZUELA

by Robin Restall

The Tri-coloured Munia's black head and belly, pure white breast and flanks contrast dramatically with the rich rufous back, wings and tail. As one drives along a country road, a flock of these birds whirring in slight undulations alongside the vehicle, just above the endless run of tall *Panicum maximum* or across an expanse of emerald green rice, is unmistakable. And unforgettable. I have seen these birds in southern India and studied them in Sri Lanka. In addition I have kept them in most of the countries in which I have lived. In fact they were the first birds I ever kept as a schoolboy in London, back in 1947. They have remained a favourite ever since. However these notes are dedicated to this species in Venezuela where it is well established in the wild and regularly appears as a locally-caught bird in pet shops.

In Venezuela, while it is not illegal to keep native birds, it is illegal to offer them for sale. This of course does not stop anybody from trapping birds and offering them (and other creatures) for sale at the roadsides at every opportunity, though in the case of the Tri-coloured Munia it is classified as an exotic, feral species, and as such is not protected by the law. Thus it is one of the few wild-caught birds that appears in pet shops here. In Venezuela, the local name is *Monjita*, or little monk, referring to its black hood or cowl.

They sell for the equivalent of about £4 (US\$6.50) each. When I had a flock in my garden aviary here they were the birds everybody remarked on and admired. That is their commercial secret, for they have no song to talk of. The aficionados of singing finches look at them and think they are related to the *Oryzoborus* seed-finches. Because of their lovely songs these are prized as cage birds all over South America, and people buy the munias thinking they are getting a songbird cheap. A tame, adult male seed-finch in song can fetch as much as the equivalent of £100 (approx.US\$160) - a whopping price in a country in which half of the population live on £1 (approx.US\$1.60) or less a day. The seed-finches have massive white bills

and are not dissimilar to munias. One species has a rufous belly and when I first netted one here I really thought I had caught a munia until I handled it and saw it properly.

Tri-coloured Munias were being imported into Venezuela in the 1940s and a letter about them written by Dr Fernandez, head of the Veterinary Faculty at Maracay University, appeared in a newspaper. In his letter, he claimed that if the *Monjitas* continued to be released at the present rate they would become established and become a pest. There is little doubt, according to the son of Dr Fernandez, also Dr Fernandez and the present head of the Veterinary Faculty at Maracay University, that birdkeepers had bought the munias to breed with the local seed-finches for their song. Once the locals realised that the munias did not sing, but just ate lots of seed, they released them.

In those days the area between Maracay and Valencia had a large lake, Lago de Valencia, and there were reedbeds and marshes at the edge. The munia barely survived year to year, for the dry season in Venezuela produces true drought conditions. The local seed-eating birds move to other areas, but the sedentary, non-migratory munia stayed, and most died. To compound its misfortunes, the Lago de Valencia served as a reservoir for the big city and too much water was extracted and what remained became polluted. The marshes shrunk and the munia just about clung on. Those that made it to the rice growing country to the south also died off during the drought, rice being a very seasonal crop (as it is in Asia today). Then something happened that dramatically changed the fortunes of the Tri-coloured Munia in Venezuela. And it was because of another bird.

The North American Dickcissel *Spiza americana* was a migrant to Trinidad (where Richard French counted nearly three million at one time), Venezuela and Colombia. It was becoming increasingly common in Venezuela, so much so that it seemed as if the entire North American population (to the relief of Trinidadian rice farmers) had discovered the rice fields here in Venezuela and had made them its favourite destination. As a result more was invested in rice production than almost anything else, leading to the creation of irrigation systems that enabled Venezuela to grow rice all year round, rotating crops month by month. This meant that instead of the Dickcissels descending in their millions and wiping out the entire year's crop, the damage was restricted to just the few months of the year the birds were present before returning to the USA to breed. Nowadays, the entire North American population winters in the rice growing area of Venezuela, and the birds are persecuted mercilessly by the farmers.

I have a friend in Australia who had on his property a large amount of unused land - a year-round marsh. He is a keen birdkeeper and the last time I saw him, he was planning to build an aviary over the entire marsh and

plant it with rice. Once the rice was established he planned to release into the aviary a small flock of *Pytilia* sp. and a few paradise whydahs *Vidua* sp. At the time, and since then, I have often thought how ideal that set-up would have been for a flock of Tri-coloured Munias, for under those circumstances they would breed very well indeed. The rice growing area of Venezuela is an ideal environment for the munias. They discovered the rice fields, but unlike the Dickcissels they did not depart after a few months, but stayed and found a munia paradise - ideal food and ideal breeding conditions - all year round. As a result they have become possibly the most numerous resident species in the rice growing areas of Venezuela. They are undoubtedly a pest, but for some reason, the farmers, obsessed with the Dickcissels, have not yet become aware of the extent to which they have a potential monster in their backyards.

Seedeating finches and smaller passerines in the Neotropics are quite different in their breeding behaviour from those elsewhere. The native finches breed after the rains have started. They breed only during the rainy season. They have very small clutches of two or perhaps three eggs and very short nestling periods. They usually have two clutches a season. The young of the Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina* fledge at nine or 10 days (but may leave the nest at eight days if disturbed) and *Sporophila* spp. fledge at 11-12 days, or sooner. This is a survival strategy that works well, for nest predation is very high indeed. Once the young fledge, their chances of reaching adulthood and surviving to breed are quite high as predation then is much lower. Compare this to temperate country species where nest predation is much lower, but losses during the moult, migration and the first winter are high. Temperate passerines tend to have larger clutches and longer nestling periods. Clearly the situation with regard to nest predation and survival of first year birds is also very different in the Old World tropics. Clutches are larger, nest predation is lower, but predation of young birds during their first few months is higher.

In Venezuela the Tri-coloured Munia has the best of both worlds. It nests low down in reeds or rice, over water, where nest predation is lowest. It has large clutches, and when there is ideal food all year round, it will produce at least two clutches - that is 10-12 fledglings in a year, more than double the number produced by local birds. Quite possibly it produces three clutches in a year. The post-fledging behaviour of Tri-coloured Munias has evolved to deal with predators in the Old World tropics, and so its survival rate at this stage is at least as high as that of local birds, possibly higher. As a result, there has in the last decade or so been a population explosion of Tri-coloured Munia.

Whenever I have been working in the field in the rice-growing areas I have mist-netted Tri-coloured Munia. About five years ago I decided to

keep some to study, to see how they would settle and whether they would behave differently from those I was familiar with from India and Sri Lanka. They settled into a cage and aviary routine astonishingly easily. In the aviary they behaved quite naturally. I have a modest outdoor flight that adjoins a birdroom at one corner of the house. The flight reaches up to the eaves of the house and my studio in which I paint looks out into it, and I can watch the birds at leisure while I work. It has a small fish pond in the centre in which a large stand of papyrus grows. Water Hyacinth also grow in the pond, and every finch I have ever kept feeds on the leaves of this nutritious plant. At the time, the aviary also had many tubs of *Phyllostachys aurea* bamboo, known here as *bambucillo*, and very popular as a garden hedging. It grew to about 3m (9ft 9in) in height.

There were seven munias in the group and a sort of hierarchy was established with a dominant female and her mate. This dominant pair built a nest, 1m (approx. 3ft 3in.) above the water, in the bamboo. It was a classic ball of grasses and strips of leaves, with an entrance at the front that looked out over the water. The nest was about 20cm (almost 8in) across. In the wild, they use growing green grasses and reed stems, strips from palm leaves and bamboo leaves to make the nest. The male brings the material and the female builds the nest. The young in my aviary were reared entirely on whatever seeds the adults selected from the canary and finch mixtures I provided. I offered softfood and also mealworms, but never saw the munias take either. By the time this happened I had acquired some local seedeaters that I needed to study as part of my work at the Phelps Ornithological Collection, so as soon as the five young fledged and were feeding themselves, I released them all.

Here in Venezuela we also have established populations of Java Sparrow *Padda oryzivora* and Village Weaver *Ploceus cucullatus*. I have not been able to net either of these, but did buy a trio of the weavers from a villager living on the edge of the marshes near Maracay. They were absolutely indefatigable and were ideal aviary birds except for the destruction they wrought on every growing thing in their quest for materials to weave with. I eventually had to release them for the same reason I had to release the munias.

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