



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founded in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

The Nuns

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Habitat

The Nuns come from India and Asia with each species having its own distribution. Feral populations of the Black-headed Nun were present in the past in Sydney and in parts of Queensland including Brisbane but appear to have disappeared now. The worry is that they might disappear completely from aviculture in Australia if they don't get a bit more attention.

Family

All the Nuns are members of the *Lonchura* family – this includes Yellow-rumps, Pictorellas, and Chestnut-breasted from Australia, Spice finches, Bengalese, Silver-bills, Rufous-backs and other species uncommon or not in Australia.

Subspecies

Most texts refer to the White-headed Nun and Tri-coloured Nun as separate species and the Black-headed Nun as a subspecies of the Tri-coloured Nun. There are several other subspecies but I have no idea as to what they look like. However there has been considerable crossbreeding between the species and with other *Lonchura* species with which they readily hybridise. The result of that is a degree of variability in each of the birds in Australia and this makes sexing more difficult if you get birds from different sources.

If you don't get your breeders from different sources inbreeding becomes a greater risk. The answer is to buy say half a dozen or even a dozen birds and let them select their own mates and resell the surplus. This makes sense also since all species are very gregarious and sociable birds.

I believe breeding results are better from a colony than from just two birds which may not even be a true pair let alone compatible.

Hybrids

Pair bonding is good and each of the species is long lived and will breed for many years. However because of the risk of crossbreeding it is not good practice to keep more than one species of *Lonchura* in an aviary. Widowed birds will readily pair up again and are just as likely to select a mate from another species as their own.

Even in my large aviaries I have had problems. Initially when I put in several mated pairs of each species I was breeding Tri Nuns, Yellow-rumps, Bengalese, Silver-bills and Javas in the one aviary and all the young were true to type. However over a period of time with odd birds dying and spare birds apparently pairing with other species, hybrids started to appear.

You can't always tell what birds these hybrids came from as most of the immature birds are much the same colour. All of the species will readily feed begging young so it is hard to be sure who are the parents of whom. Even when these crossbreeds mature they give few clues as to their parentage.

Consequently I removed the Silver-bills, but the problem persisted, so the Bengalese and Javas also came out. I will be watching carefully now to see if there is any nonsense between the Tri-colours and Yellow-rumps. This will be fairly easy because the Tri-colours (about 10) tend to stay in a group and inhabit different parts of the aviary or at different times to the flock of Yellow-rumps (also about 10), although they all nest and nest in the one favourite area.

Hybrids of Nuns have also been recorded with various other species including Zebra, Double-bar and Longtail finches but these are probably sterile hybrids whereas the Munia hybrids are fully fertile.

Housing

Nuns can be housed in any sort of aviary but if not provided with enough means of exercise they readily become obese. Their toenails also become very long and curled if they haven't sufficient variety of branches to keep nails worn. Nuns fly fast and straight. Their aerial manoeuvring is limited and they are easily stressed if pursued for even a short period.

Unfortunately they are notorious for stripping grasses and shrubs in the aviary.

Feeding

A staple dry seed diet (canary and white French millet) and regular green feed is all that is necessary. I provide a special finch mix as well as greens, cake, fruit, egg/biscuit mix, boiled eggs and a variety of live food but rarely have I seen a Nun eat anything other than seed and greens. Breeding results tend to be poor if greens and seeding grasses are not regularly supplied. They are fond of sprouted seed.

Clean water is necessary as they love to bathe often.

Breeding

All of the Nuns are long lived - compare this with most African species where breeding results drop sharply after the second year. The Nuns are also very hardy and non-aggressive birds and are good breeders. They are good parents with a preference for colony breeding. A dome shaped nest is built quickly with either dry or green grasses lined with finer materials but they are not keen on feathers. Most pairs lay 5-7 eggs, both parents incubate for 14 days and young fledge in three weeks. All roost in nest at night with parents calling chicks to bed. Self-sufficient at two weeks when the hen is usually back on a nest with next batch. They will breed all year round with a short break for moulting.

I note English literature suggests that Nuns are poor breeders. This is certainly not the case with the birds here in Australia. In my large open planted aviaries they breed throughout the year pausing only for a mid-summer moult. Cold wind and rain doesn't seem to worry them although I suspect that they would not like frosts or snow which I do not experience at Pennant Hills. Nuns are excellent parents, usually rearing 4-7 chicks from each nest and they will breed for at least five years. Occasionally birds will breed before attaining adult plumage. Some pairs will nest in boxes or other receptacles but mostly they prefer to build their own nests in brush in the sheltered part of the aviary.

Sexing

While there are many subtle differences between the sexes in all three Nuns none of these are reliable because of the above variations (subspecies and past cross breeding). It really doesn't matter if you run a colony but the following are some of the methods that can be used to sex them – I suggest you use as many of these clues as possible if you must be sure of sexes:

- In all 3 species the under tail coverts tend to be jet black in the male and dark black-brown in the hen. This is particularly so on the edges of the feathers in the hen bird.

- The head colour of the White-headed Nun tends to be more silver in the male and grey in the hen.
- In all species the upper rump colours are more vivid and shiny in the male.
- Beaks are more robust and roman nosed in cocks after about six months.
- Calls – cocks have high pitched call hens deeper and harsher – OK if you are not deaf. Can sex on this call from two months of age.
- Cocks are more likely to crow but I have seen some hen's crow and some cocks may not try when you are watching.
- The head of the cock bird tends to be larger and squarer than that of hens and broader between the eyes.
- If all this fails wait and see if eggs appear and are then converted into young – then you have a true pair.

The Species

Sometimes these birds are called Manikins or Munias instead of Nuns. They are all about 2/3 of an ounce in weight (18-19 grams) with the Black-headed Nun being slightly smaller than the other two.

Tri-coloured Nun – *Lonchura malacca Malacca* - Central and southern India. Chestnut wings and back, white breast, black head, throat, belly and tail and the upper tail coverts have a golden brown lustre particularly at the edges.

Black-headed Nun – *Lonchura malacca atricapilla* – occurs throughout Asia and India. Colour body – deep chestnut brown, head and neck black, belly, under parts and flight feathers darker brown/black. The upper tail coverts again are a golden brown.

White-headed Nun – *Lonchura maja* – Malaysia and Indonesia. Chestnut with a white head, neck tinged with buff/grey. The body colour darkens down the middle of the belly to the under tail coverts while the upper tail coverts have a golden brown hue. Unlike the other two species the head and body colours do not stop and start sharply but gradually blend together.

Immature Colour – The colour of immature birds varies slightly and there seems to be subtle differences between the species but I could not rely on any of these to identify the birds. Generally immature birds are dull brown tinged with Rufous on the rump. The chin, throat and abdomen are lighter to buff white. They take a long time to colour up especially if bred during the colder months – up to six months. This fact is used in illegal export of young Yellow-rumps, Pictorellas, Chestnuts and Gouldians by declaring them as nuns. Like Gouldians they may breed before attaining adult plumage.

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