

Breeding the Magpie Mannikin

(*Lonchura fringilloides*)

by Kris Kroner
Ambler, Pennsylvania

First successfully raised young hatched 12-11-88, fledged 1-3-89, weaned 1-21-89 in the state of Pennsylvania.

Magpie mannikins are the largest of the African mannikins. Sexes are alike although there is some color variation in that the female has more buff feathering in her abdomen while the males appear more white. I have found that the color variation seems more apparent in wild-caught birds and is nearly impossible to detect in domestically raised birds. This, perhaps, is age related. The birds are approximately 4-1/2 inches long and have a strong, stocky body. Their bills are heavy and longer than other proportionately sized mannikins.

Courtship is composed of the male performing a typical mannikin type dance consisting of hopping up and down while gesticulating with the beak. His song (which really isn't a song) is similar to a Nun's call, a type



The Magpie Mannikin is sometimes referred to as a Pied Mannikin due to its high contrasting color markings. It is not a mutation. This African bird is a member of the waxbill family.

of squeaky, high pitched note. The females do a ritual beak wiping while the males sing to them if breeding is to occur.

Magpies tend to be destructive with wicker nests, live plants and grasses. They enjoy stripping grasses and seeding heads of grasses and plants. Their large beak enables them to accomplish this with ease.

I have found these birds can be housed in small groups providing the cage space is large and there are spots to escape and hide. However, when one pair decides to nest, the male will pursue and attack other "rivals" to drive them away from his perceived territory.

In my birdroom, I also breed the Java sparrow. This species has been a suitable companion in a holding flight situation. My holding cages are 4 feet long x 3 feet x 3 feet. There is some territorial behavior that occurs but the situation remains fairly peaceful. The Magpie can also be housed safely with weavers and whydahs. However, the situation must be carefully monitored for any signs of aggression.

I obtained my birds from a quarantine station and started with four birds and hoped for two pairs. These four were placed in my quarantine room in a cage 3 feet long x 2 feet x 2 feet. I supplied a large, wicker nest since I assumed (correctly) they would use it for roosting. Plastic asparagus fern was hung in various spots from the cage top and sides. Past experience had taught me that most birds like to hide in the fern and it, being plastic, is indestructible. I color banded the birds for identification. There was no way of determining their age but they were mature as evidenced by their beaks and feet.

All four roosted together in the wicker nest. After my self-imposed 30 day quarantine had expired, I moved the four birds to the birdroom to a similar sized cage. Various sizes and types of nests were offered. Natural perches are of pesticide-free



The adult Magpie Mannikins built their nest out of hay. This large, woven nest was built very high in their cage using a plastic asparagus fern as a base.

Photos by Kristine Kroner



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tree branches. The four roosted again in a large, wicker nest until two birds paired off. This occurred approximately 90 days after their acquisition. The pair ignored manufactured nests and boxes and built a free form nest using the asparagus fern as a base. The male became aggressive during this building and I removed the second pair. The two members of the pair were determined by observation of the color bands. Nesting material consisted of dried grasses, coco fiber and burlap strands and wicker pieces from the roosting nest. To get these, they cheerfully bit into the woven fabric of the nest and pulled the horizontal pieces through. In about an hour, I had a Conestoga wagon-type frame left. Their nest resembled a hornet type nest with one tiny opening near the bottom. The nest cavity itself is built lower than the opening. Both spend most of the time in the nest.

Varieties of live food are offered to my birds as well as eggfood, modified Dr. Kray's diet (rice, corn, pinto beans, crumbled dog food) and greens. The Magpies love the large (proso) millets and prefer a budgie type mix to the standard finch mix. They are also very fond of oat groats.

They eat live food (mealworms) only when in breeding condition. They consistently refuse wax moth larvae and white worms. I also offer mineral grit and oyster shell. My eggfood mixture is Mr. Robert Black's recipe from his book *Nutrition of Finches and Cage Birds*. These mixtures and foods are well accepted once the birds are acclimated.

My birdroom has natural light and is supplemented with Vita-Lights on timers. Other birds (mostly mannikins) occupy the room but breeding pairs are housed by themselves.

The hen laid four white eggs and incubated tightly. The first young, unfortunately, hatched while I was away for the weekend and a new caretaker was tending my flock. When I returned, I found all four chicks had been killed and thrown from the nest. I assumed this was, at least, partially due to the fact there was a change in routine as I am the primary caretaker.

However, as anyone that has dealt with African species knows, they have a nasty tendency to hatch young but not feed. I share the commonly held belief that this is due to the pairs feeling that unsuitable nestling food is being offered. I refuse to offer termites which is probably what they

wanted and, instead, I tried different types of live food.

The pair tore the nest apart and rebuilt elsewhere. Again she laid four eggs, incubated tightly and killed the first chick hatched. I fostered the other three eggs to Societies, who hatched and raised the chicks. This was the first time I had bred this species of mannikin successfully.

The pair then rebuilt in a more inaccessible location in the cage and prepared the next nest like a fortress. I assumed it was retribution for my taking their eggs. The problem, you will note, is that with the type of nest they built, I never was sure when the first egg was laid. Since I was lucky to see the female once a day, I knew the cycle had started again. I toyed with the idea of taking the eggs immediately for fostering yet continued to offer different insects and foods, hoping they would feed.

The pair never did feed but continued to lay eggs, incubate and kill their first chick (I assume it's the female doing this). The remaining eggs were immediately fostered to Societies. Their largest clutch was six. Their incubation time was approximately 13 to 14 days. This pair gave me 20 domestic chicks all fostered by Society finches. The pair themselves look magnificent. And why not? All they did was eat, lay eggs and rest. I have moved them now to a resting flight and they are busy building in the corner. They obviously like this deal. The Magpies nest during the fall and winter. They began showing breeding behavior in October.

I have acquired other wild-caught individuals and I am very interested in breeding a female domestic to one of these males to determine their parenting behavior. I do believe the hen was the one that killed the chicks.

The chicks are greyish pink when hatched and are readily accepted by Societies. Three is a nice number to foster, although I have fostered four to one pair. I found that was expecting a lot out of the Societies, however, and did some supplemental feeding around the banding/fledging time to the smallest in that clutch. These feedings were simply a mixture of baby oatmeal and a little Nutri-cal.

The chicks develop slowly. I find the best day to band these babies is on the thirteenth day with a "G" NFS band. Yes, I did say the *thirteenth* day. I do not believe this is due to nutritional deficiency, but is purely species development. I tried earlier but the

bands slipped off or up. These chicks develop body size first and feet and legs grow mostly the second week of life. The thirteenth day, I use some lubrication and slide the band on. I have had no problems with this timing. Juvenile feathering is typical mannikin. Brown upper body, light brown gray underside. Once fledged at approximately 18 to 19 days, the birds are approximately the size of an adult Society finch. They then have an immense growth spurt, most noticeably in their beak. Fledging age birds have a beak larger than Societies', but it grows like Pinocchio's in the third to fourth week of life. They wean about two to three weeks after fledging, and I put them in holding flights around 30 days post fledging. They are then about one and one-half times as large as Society finches, weighing close to 20 grams. They molt into adult color at approximately three months of age. The domestics are about one fourth larger than their parents and the other imports I possess. I presume this is due to nutrition and the availability and acceptance of an excellent diet.

Youngsters are allowed to remain together as a clutch until about six weeks old when the "clutch" is put with slightly older Magpies. As with any species, small groups can be added to existing flocks but single additions are not tolerated. The youngsters are not kept with Society finches once pulled from their foster parents but have visual and auditory contact. An interesting note is that the domestics, although raised in a wicker nest, refuse these nests once they molt into adult color, choosing instead to build their own (and demolishing the wicker nest, using it to supplement their nesting grasses).

I do enjoy working with these fascinating birds. I encourage and challenge each of you to choose a species and work with it to establish captive bred domestic populations. We, as aviculturists, are perhaps the only way many species will remain available and perhaps their only future since habitat is being so quickly destroyed worldwide. ●

Editor's Note: Any persons knowing of a successful breeding of the Magpie Mannikin prior to the dates stated in this article, please notify Dale R. Thompson, chairperson, Avy Awards Committee, through the AFA Home Office.

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