

Observations on Wild and Captive Mannikins And Their Allies

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There are three logical species-groups of the mannikin family. Hall and Moreau consider the Red-headed Finch or Paradise Sparrow (*Amadina erythrocephala*) and the Cut-throat Finch or Ribbon Finch (*Amadina fasciata*) as belonging to this family, comprising the first group. The African Silverbill (*Spermestes [Lonchura] malabarica*) and the Pearl-headed Silverbill (*Spermestes [Lonchura] griseicapilla*) form another; and the Bronze Mannikin (*Spermestes [Lonchura] culiculata*), Black and White Mannikin (*Spermestes [Lonchura] bicolor*) and Magpie Mannikin (*Spermestes [Lonchura] fringilloides*) form the third.

Red-heads range from South Africa to Namibia, Botswana, western Zimbabwe to Angola. Cut-throats occur in South Africa, eastern Swaziland, southern Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Botswana, northern Namibia, Malawi, Kenya, eastern Tanzania to south-eastern Sudan and northern Nigeria

and Senegal. I have not been fortunate enough to locate a nest of Cut-throats in the wild. However, they have been recorded utilizing a wide variety of nest sites from low down in a thick bush to 4.5 m up in a tree. Besides constructing their own nest, they commonly use disused nests of weavers and have also been observed nesting in a post. My observation of two Red-head nests were in those discarded by Sicial Weavers which were relined with feathers, wool and other soft materials. They have also been recorded utilizing the nest of a Little

Photo by Neville Brickell



Pied or Magpie Mannikins build nests of dried grasses and leaves into spherical balls in the wild and prefer natural nesting sites of cane and bamboos in captivity as well.

I have been studying mannikins and their allies in the field and in captivity for over 30 years. These are common, highly gregarious species, living in pairs or small flocks and outside of the breeding season they gather into larger flocks. The typical mannikins favor moist, riparian fringing forests and dense thickets whereas Cut-throats and Red-heads live mostly in dry acacia savannas and disused cultivation.



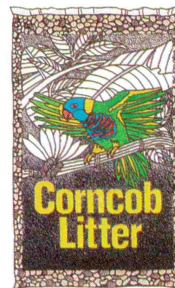
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Swift and a Cape Sparrow.

The African Silverbill or Warbling Silverbill ranges from Tanzania to Ethiopia, Somalia, western Sudan westward to Senegal. The Pearl-headed Silverbill or Grey-headed Silverbill is found from Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda to southern Ethiopia. I have not been able to locate the nest of an African Silverbill in the wild. Other observations have revealed that nests are built of grass and have vertical side entrances which are then lined with seeding grassheads, sometimes perched and sited in trees of long grass. They also utilize old weavers' nests which are then relined. Two instances of wasps' nest association has been reported. My observation of a Pearl-headed Silverbill's nest consisted of a large, untidy dried grass structure placed beneath the roof of a hut and lined with goat hair and a few fowl feathers.

The Bronze Mannikin or Bronze-winged Mannikin occurs from Senegal on the west coast to Ethiopia on the east coast, southward to Angola and South Africa and is also found on the offshore islands of Fernando Po, Principe, Sao Thome, Pemba, Zanzibar and Mafia. The Black and White Mannikin or Blue-billed Mannikin ranges from South Africa to Zambia, Zimbabwe, Zaire, Angola, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan westward to Cameroon, Nigeria, Guinea and Liberia. The Magpie Mannikin or Pied Mannikin ranges from Senegal eastward to southern Sudan, Cameroon, Gabon, northern Zaire, western Uganda, Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa.

The Bronze-winged Mannikin constructs a large spherical ball of grass lined with seeding grassheads. An entrance hole is situated on one side with a few stalks protruding, giving the impression of a short tunnel. Roosting nests are much thinner and more flimsy than breeding nests. A wide variety of nest sites have been recorded such as in trees, bushes, in the thatches of huts, on security light supports and they are also known to reline the old nests of weavers. My own observations were in palms, an aloe and a relined Cordon Bleu nest. In West Africa, they have been observed to build close to nests of the vicious Red Tree Ant, apparently for protection.

The Black and White Mannikins pre-

fer more secluded sites in which to construct. My single observation was in a clump of bamboo. I recently came across two nests of the Rufous-backed Mannikin, one in a creeper and the other in a clump of wild cane. They were large globular structures composed of both dried and green grasses, and lined with seeding grassheads and a few feathers, mostly of dove and guinea fowl. At the one site, six birds were involved in the construction of a roosting nest. The Magpie Mannikin usually builds at about 3 to 5 m from the ground in bush, tree or bamboo. The nest is also a spherical ball of dried grass and leaves, then lined with seeding grassheads and a few feathers. The entrance hole is situated at the top and faces west. Nests are also built for two purposes, namely breeding and roosting. Nests may be solitary or colonial comprising three or four built together. The nest I observed in the acacia tree constructed of seedheads of a common reed, White Ironwood leaves and a finer grass as lining including two rich brown colored feathers of a coucal.

In captivity, I found that the inflorescence of the following grasses, namely *Rhynchelytrum*, *Panicum* and *Echinochloa*, played a large part in nest construction of all of my mannikins. A wide variety of lining materials can be offered, but I prefer tall grass and coir, only because coconut fibers and raffia are not always readily available in southern Africa.

My Cut-throats and Red-heads preferred to reline Thick-billed Weaver nests attached to branches or utilized artificial nesting sites, mostly Gouldian Finch boxes rather than construct their own nests in the vegetation. The African and Pearl-headed Silverbills were satisfied with wire mesh cylinders, 820 gram fruit tins, with one end half open or the widely used finch nest box. The Bronze-winged, Black and White and Magpie Mannikins preferred natural nesting sites in the form of wild cane and bamboos or dried curry bushes attached to the walls of the sleeping quarters. I have also observed captive Magpie Mannikins favoring a *Euphorbia* tree where they built solitary nests whereas those in curry bushes were in colonies comprising three or four built together as one large structure.

The eggs of mannikins are white

with clutches consisting of between three to four eggs, but sometimes up to seven. The incubation periods last 12 to 16 days.

In their natural habitat, the seedheads of numerous grasses form the basic diet with the inclusion of sorghum, rice and bamboo seeds. This is supplemented with nectar and insects. The Magpie Mannikin has been recorded feeding on the seeds of Bindura Bamboo, the Rufous-backed Mannikin on the petals of weeping Boer bean and the Black and White Mannikin on the nectar of flowering gum. All, with the exception of the Cut-throat and Red-head, have been observed eating the dried leaves of the Water-weed Frog spittle *Spirogyra*.

In captivity, they are easy to cater for as their staple diet simply comprises of a good mixture of millets. Wild plant foods, especially seeding grasses, chickweed, thistle and black jacks and cultivated green foods, in the form of watercress, spinach, sprouted seed and freshly cut lucerne, are always received with interest by the birds. Magpie Mannikins were observed on many occasions to ignore the seedheads of grasses but immediately begin to extract the sap from the long stems. Only when this was completely extracted would they show any interest in the seedheads. They also fed on the small white flower heads of the Dwarf Marigold and stripped the dying leaves of a Giant Leaved Fig. Nectar in the form of syrup prepared from caramel and brown sugar was placed in canary tube feeders and fixed to branches. The Cut-throats and Red-heads were not seen to take nectar, but the mannikins drank the fluid at least twice a day.

All the birds take some form of live food in their natural habitat, mostly termites, ground and tree species being plentiful in Africa. Aviary birds preferred termites, mealworms, aphids and small red ants which were not supplied but arrived by being attracted to the nectar. Red-heads were found to take live food very occasionally. Rearing food was given during the breeding season, notably hard boiled egg, sponge cake, moistened whole wheat bread and dog biscuits. Also, on a daily basis, cuttlefish bone, crushed oyster shell, baked fowl egg shells, mineral grit and spray millet were offered. ●