Range extension of Chestnut Munia
Lonchura atricapilla to Gujarat, western India

Yagnesh Bhatt, Bimal Patel & B. M. Parasharya


The Black-headed Munia Lonchura malacca, now known as Tricoloured Munia, till recently comprised three subspecies in the Indian Subcontinent: the nominate L. m. malacca occupying the southern Indian Peninsula (south to Mumbai); the northern L. m. rubroniger, restricted to the western Himalayan foothills and terai region, including Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, and L. m. atricapilla occurring in Assam, Manipur, and Bangladesh, westwards to eastern Nepal (Ali & Ripley 2001).

The Tricoloured Munia L. malacca is now considered monotypic (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). L. malacca was not known to occur above the 18ºN latitude in the southern Indian Peninsula (Ali & Ripley 1983). However, in recent past, the species has extended its range considerably towards north-western India (Abdulali 1966; Breeden & Breeden 1982; Gole 1983; Monga & Naoroji 1984; Khachar 1985; Parasharya & Patel 1986; Jamdar 1998; Borad et al. 2000; Sharma 2001; Sangha 2002; Urfi 2003), and north-eastwards (Singh & Rout 1992). It now breeds in several places in Gujarat (Mathew et al. 1992; Khacher 1996; Mashru 2005; Patel 2006; Prajapati & Jani 2017; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). The north-eastern subspecies of the Black-headed Munia L. m. atricapilla is now recognized as a separate species (Restall 1996), and known as Chestnut Munia L. atricapilla atricapilla, with one subspecies, L. a. rubroniger. The nominate subspecies is resident in north-eastern India, while rubroniger occurs in the foothills of the western Himalayas (Grimmet et al. 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). So far, L. atricapilla has not been reported from either southern, or western India vide Pittie (2018). In this paper, we report the range extension of the Chestnut Munia in Gujarat, western India, and also report the probable hybridization between Tricoloured Munia and Chestnut Munia.

Sightings and discussion

On 24 December 2017, while photographing, and birding around Tarapur (22.489ºN, 72.658ºE), Anand District, Gujarat (western India), two of us (YB & BP) saw a flock of c. 60–70 munias (Estrildidae), which largely comprised Tricoloured Munia [194], a few Scaly-breasted Munia L. punctulata, and one Chestnut Munia on the hedge bordering a cultivated field. All of the birds were perched either on Typha reeds, or adjoining Prosopis juliflora trees, and, from there, were periodically dropping to the ground to feed on grains of rice Oryza sativa that were spilled on the ground; as well as from nearby haystacks. These three species remained, and foraged together. The flock remained at the same site, at least, for the next two days as food was abundant.

While photographing them, YB realized that one of the munias looked different from its congeners, with distinct chestnut on both, its belly, and its back. Its head and neck were black, as in a Tricoloured Munia. After referring to field guides, and comparing with images on Oriental Bird Club Image gallery (2018), we concluded that the bird in question was a Chestnut Munia. In [194], the black marking on the belly was not visible due to the angle from which the photograph was taken. In a second photograph [195], taken on the same date, the black colour of the lower belly was visible.

194. A flock of Tricoloured Munias and Scaly-breasted Munias, with one Chestnut Munia.

195. A Chestnut Munia showing black colour on lower belly.
While re-examining our old pictures, taken around Tarapur, we came across one of a Chestnut Munia feeding on the ground, along with Tricoloured Munias; its black patch on the belly could not be seen as its picture was taken from the front. However, in another picture, of a Chestnut Munia flying in to the perch, the bird is clearly showing a black patch on its belly.

We re-examined our old images of Tricoloured Munia for colour variations. We have pictures of a mixed species flock of Black-throated Weaver *Ploceus benghalensis* and Tricoloured Munia, in flight, near Tarapur, from 13 March 2011 [196, 197]. In these, we found that some adult Tricoloured Munia had faint chestnut on the belly, instead of pure white. In [196] (in the central area of right side), a munia is showing light chestnut colour. In [197] (in the right top corner), one Tricoloured Munia is intermediately coloured; its belly between white and chestnut. This is an intermediate character between Tricoloured Munia and Chestnut Munia. Some of the images of Tricoloured Munia on the Oriental Bird Club Image Database (www.orientalbirdimages.org; henceforth, OBC Image Gallery), by Subrato Sanyal (Sanyal 2014, 2016); Anujit Kar Bhowmik (Bhowmik 2015), and Srikumar Bose (Bose 2015) (No. 53, 72, 68, 74), are similar to photographs [196] and [197], showing intermediate characters, which might be hybrids between Tricoloured Munia and Chestnut Munia.

The prevalence of presumed hybrid specimens, between Tricoloured and Chestnut Munia, in old images indicates that the Chestnut Munia may be quite prevalent in our area, and might have established itself long ago, but had slipped the notice of birdwatchers and photographers in Gujarat. One needs to keep a watch on the presence of the Chestnut Munia over entire distributional range of the Tricoloured Munia, as the later is found in Gujarat and Rajasthan, vis-à-vis the presence of Tricoloured Munia in the known distribution range of Chestnut Munia, and their hybridization is evident, to some extent, on the OBC Image Gallery—but there is a need to monitor them closely, as opined by Rasmussen and Anderton (2012). The presence of the Chestnut Munia in West Bengal is evident from OBC Image Gallery (OBC 2018). Its presence is also recorded from Bihar (Dey et al. 2014), and Odisha (Debata et al. 2013), suggesting a westward range extension. From the above, it is evident that both the species of munias are extending their distributional range, which often overlap resulting in hybridization. In such conditions, only DNA barcoding may help in determining the genetic distance between these two munias and identify their hybrids, if any.

References


**Sighting of the Golden-crested Myna* Ampeliceps coronatus in Karimganj District, Assam, with notes on its distribution**

Vijay Anand Ismavel & Rejoice Gassah


Vijay Anand Ismavel, Makunda Christian Hospital, Karimganj District 788727, Assam, India. E-mail: ivijayanand@yahoo.in [VAI]

Rejoice Gassah, Makunda Christian Hospital, Karimganj District 788727, Assam, India. E-mail: joicesatisfy@gmail.com [RG]

**Editorial Comment:** Munias showing characters mostly of Chestnut Munia, or showing intermediate characters have been reported widely from Peninsular India (See https://ebird.org/media/india/catalog?taxonCode=x00932). Exact origins of these birds is unclear. Are they birds from the wild population, straggling south and/or potentially hybridising with resident Tricoloured Munias? Or are these cage escapee Chestnut Munias, or birds from subsequent generations after the cage escapee birds bred with the local Tricoloured Munias? Or could these just be abberant colour morphs of Tricoloured Munias instilled by a recessive gene? Till date, there are no records of Tricoloured Munias in the flocks of Chestnut Munias. More studies are required to establish the origins of these birds (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) and any conclusions and decisions drawn till then are only tentative.

On the 28 September 2017, RG visited a forest track in the Badsaitilla Reserve Forest (24.33°N, 92.35°E) between Dullabcherra, Assam, and Mizoram, as part of the biodiversity documentation work of the Makunda Nature Club. He observed a large flock of Common Hill Munas *Gracula religiosa* feeding on wild figs. Along with this flock were a group of distinctly different mynas. Some of these individuals (presumably adult males) had a golden-yellow forehead, crown, and nape, forming a recumbent crest. The same colour extended downwards, over the lores, the chin, and the center throat. Other individuals (presumably adult females) had less gold on their foreheads and only a strip of yellow down the chin and chest. Duller coloured birds, vis-à-vis adults, with pale lores, wing patch, and throat, with faint streaking below and lesser golden-yellow feathers, were also observed, and were probably juveniles. Photographs [198, 199] were taken, and the birds identified as Golden-crested Mynas *Ampeliceps coronatus*.

Subsequently, VAI and RG visited the site on 08 October 2017. A large flock of Common Hill Munas was spotted in a group of fig trees on the opposite side of a deep ravine. A photograph of a Golden-crested Myna, perched on a tree along with Common Hill Mynas, was taken. The bird remained perched on the tree for some time and then flew away with the other mynas. Following this, this species has been sought,