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OCCURRENCE, BREEDING, AND EXPANSION OF THE SCALY-BREASTED MUNIA (*Lonchura punctulata*) POPULATION IN NORTHWEST FLORIDA 1999–2017

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The Scaly-breasted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*), known as Nutmeg Mannikin or Spice Finch in the aviculture trade (hereafter *munias*), was first observed in the extreme western Panhandle of Florida in west Pensacola on 9 April 1999 (Duncan 2009). By the end of 1999 they were found on the east side of the city near Pensacola Regional Airport. The first report of breeding was on 3 July 1999 with the appearance of a juvenile accompanying two adults near the original sighting (Duncan 2009). Reports continued through 2008 with as many as 80 individuals frequenting feeders (D. Stangeland and B. Scott, pers. comm.). As of that year the species was being reported widely in the Pensacola area and had spread westward into neighboring Baldwin County, Alabama (J. Dickerson, pers. comm.).

To assess its population size and distribution, the senior author solicited reports of numbers and locations of munias from local birders in February 2008. Based on responses to our query, the estimated number in the Pensacola area was between 135-144 individuals (Duncan 2009). A salvaged bird from 2008 (UF 47910) and two nests from 2011 (#94720) were deposited with the Florida Museum of Natural History (FLMNH) at Gainesville. In addition, FLMNH has five other salvaged specimens from Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, Florida.

Inasmuch as sixteen years had elapsed since the first sighting and known breeding of the munias in the Pensacola area, we again solicited reports from local birders for their maximum number present during a four-day period 30 January to 2 February 2015. Nine birders responded from Florida, one from Alabama and two from Mississippi.

In Florida, the totals ranged from 145-160 for each day in the four-day period. These counts were only from observers who maintained feeding stations. Thus, the totals do not represent the entire population.

Scaly-breasted Munias are not confined to feeding stations. We have encountered the species in commercial districts in Pensacola where feeders were highly unlikely. In one instance, the munias were feeding in short cut grass adjacent to a hospital, and in another, they were feeding in a small oak by a retention pond. On 30 April 2015 two munias were observed feeding in grass at a park on the outskirts of Milton, Santa Rosa County (Les Kelly, pers. comm.). Jerry and Brenda Callaway (pers. comm.) first observed munias 13 July 2013 at International Paper Company Wetlands, a 1,214 ha wooded tract with 486 ha of impoundments west of Pensacola, where they were feeding on grasses (Fig. 1). Through 12 July 2015 they found 4-8 individuals on eight occasions consistently feeding on wild vegetation. (The IP Wetlands are not open to the public.)

Scaly-breasted Munias first appeared on the Pensacola Christmas Bird Count (CBC) in December 2001 when nine birds were reported. Since then, they have appeared on all but two CBCs, with a maximum of 67 in December 2011. The diameter of the CBC circle is a fraction of



Figure 1. Eight male Scaly-breasted Munias were found feeding voraciously on a non-native grass (*Paspalum* sp.) in the early morning of 6 May 2017 at the International Paper Company wetlands in NW Escambia County. Photo by Brenda Callaway.

the munias' range in northwest Florida, therefore limiting the number reported. The first reference to Scaly-breasted Munias reported by the Duncans in *Florida Field Naturalist* for the Pensacola area referred to birds regularly appearing at feeders in the winter of 1999-2000 (Pranty 2001).

By January 2013 the species had spread north and east across the Escambia River Delta to Pace in Santa Rosa County. In Pace, 40-60 munias including juveniles regularly frequented feeders in early 2015 (D. Stangeland, pers. comm.), and two munias had reached Carpenters' Park at Milton, 13 km east of Pace (L. Kelly, pers. comm.).

Since July 2015, we have received and archived over 100 personal emails reporting Scaly-breasted Munias in Florida from the Alabama-Florida line eastward through Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties. These reports and photographs came primarily from people who do not participate in eBird. Their observations range from munias at feeders to others on the road shoulder, on power lines, and in the tops of trees. The reports cover the geographic area from the shore of Perdido Bay with around 40 (S. Yates pers. comm.) in western Escambia, to 24 or more on the Santa Rosa Peninsula (P. Bennett pers. comm.), to 12 feeding on native vegetation in Pace within a chemical plant where there are no feeders, and east to Navarre Beach Park.

Reports and the map from eBird show that the Scaly-breasted Munia is consistent and widespread in both Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, and has spread to adjacent counties in Alabama and Mississippi (Fig. 2, eBird 2017). Feeder-based reports range from 2-70

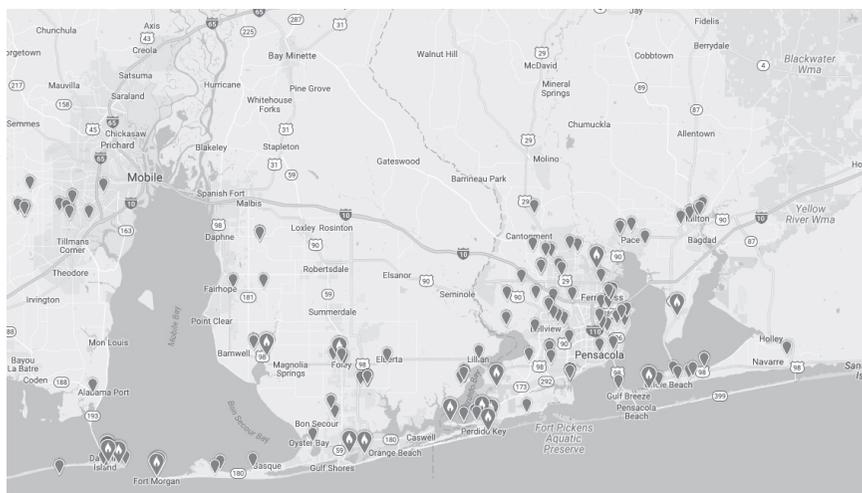


Figure 2. Sightings of Scaly-breasted Munias in the western Panhandle and vicinity, reported to eBird as of 30 August 2017.

individuals. Munias feeding on native and ornamental vegetation away from bird feeders range in groups up to 20 individuals.

The Scaly-breasted Munia expanded its range beyond the Pensacola region prior to the 2008 assessment (Duncan 2009). By 2004 it had reached Lillian, Baldwin County, Alabama about 18 km southwest of the original Pensacola sightings and about 1.2 km across Perdido Bay. As many as 50-100 frequented Dickerson's Lillian yard and feeders (J. Dickerson, pers. comm.).

The first munia reported in *Alabama Birdlife* was one observed 16 November 2007 on the Ft. Morgan Peninsula (Kittle et al. 2008). By 2008 Scaly-breasted Munias were reported farther west along Hwy. 180 west of Gulf Shores, Alabama (J. Dickerson, pers. comm.). The species' continued westward movement was evident by a report of two at Dauphin Island, Mobile County, Alabama on 22 January 2010, again indicating that water is no barrier to expansion; these two may have crossed about 6.2 km at the mouth of Mobile Bay from the Ft. Morgan Peninsula (S. Duncan, pers. comm.), or 8.5-9.5 km from the Mobile County mainland. Six munias were seen at the Dauphin Island Airport 15 January 2014 (Haffenden 2014). On 22 June 2015, J. Dickerson watched them carrying nesting material into Purple Martin (*Progne subis*) houses. Subsequent examination by Dickerson and Bill Summerour found domed munia nests composed of grasses and very fine weed culms in two martin boxes. Each nest contained 7-8 fresh eggs (Bill Summerour, pers. comm.).

Scaly-breasted Munias were first observed in Mississippi by Jason Pyron at Diamondhead, Hancock County in November 2010, about 200 km from Pensacola. By June 2013 they were described as being widespread there with over 50 frequenting feeders. Susan Epps observed that their favorite food in her Diamondhead yard when not at her feeder is panic grass (*Panicum* sp.).

The species' continued expansion has been noted 65 km northwest of Pensacola with reports from Daphne, Baldwin County, Alabama on 3 November 2012 (Kittle et al. 2013), and from 80 km north of Pensacola from Atmore, Escambia County, Alabama on 9-15 January 2014 (Kittle et al. 2014).

Since 1999, the Scaly-breasted Munia has been widely reported in Escambia and Santa Rosa Counties, Florida with a number of reports from adjacent south Alabama counties of Baldwin, Mobile, and Escambia, and from coastal Mississippi. They have been found in varied habitats from suburban yards with bird feeders to commercial districts, industrial sites, golf courses and wetlands where there are no feeders. Munias have been photographed feeding on native and ornamental plants, primarily grasses (Fig. 3). The Scaly-breasted Munia has survived two Category 3 hurricanes and sub-freezing temperatures



Figure 3. Scaly-breasted Munias 5 November 2016 on the Cypress Lakes Golf course in Gonzalez, Escambia County, Florida, where they ate non-native pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) as they ignored golfers playing through. Photo by Perry Doggrell.



Figure 4. Undeterred by nearby traffic, Scaly-breasted Munias tucked this nest into the fork of a small oak tree (*Quercus* sp.) at a busy intersection in north Pensacola, Escambia County, Florida. Nest found 25 June 2016. Photo by Brenda Callaway.



Figure 5. This Scaly-breasted Munia nest woven with long blades of the highly invasive cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) was found 20 August 2015 in Pace, Santa Rosa County, Florida. The domed shape and side entrance to the nest are typical of the estrildid finches. Photo by Brenda Callaway.

(Duncan 2009). Nests have been found in Pensacola, Cantonment, and Pace, Florida, as well as in Baldwin County, Alabama (Figs. 4 and 5). We consider Scaly-breasted Munias to have a well-established, self-supporting population in this region of northwest Florida, and should be considered an established exotic in Florida.

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