

## THE STATUS OF THE NUTMEG MANNIKIN (*Lonchura punctulata*) IN THE EXTREME WESTERN PANHANDLE OF FLORIDA

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The Nutmeg Mannikin (*Lonchura punctulata*) is a widespread species native to India, southern China, Taiwan, Java, Sumatra, the Celebes, and the Philippines (Restall 1997). It is an adaptable species, occurring in open or semi-open upland habitats, hedgerows, and a variety of human-modified habitats (Restall 1997). Nutmeg Mannikins (hereafter sometimes simply "mannikins") are common in the pet trade, and as a result, naturalized populations are found in Australia, Hawaii, and southern California. A few mannikins have been seen in recent years in southern Florida. In this note, I report on a moderate-sized population of Nutmeg Mannikins in the Pensacola area, Escambia County, Florida. To assess their population size and distribution, I solicited reports of numbers and locations of mannikins from local birders in February 2008. Twenty-three observers submitted information on their sightings.

The earliest observations of Nutmeg Mannikins in the Pensacola area occurred in 1999, and reports are concentrated in two areas: Saufley Field area in western Pensacola, and near Pensacola Regional Airport in northeastern Pensacola. The first observation was 9 April 1999 near Saufley Field and the Escambia County Fairgrounds. By the end of the year mannikins were also being reported from the vicinity of the airport. Reports continue through the present, with as many as 80 birds visiting suburban feeders. The first report of breeding was the appearance of a juvenile and two adults near Saufley Field 3 July 1999 (Peggy Gibbs, pers. comm.).

Based on responses to my e-mail query, I estimate that the population of Nutmeg Mannikins in the Pensacola area numbered between 135-144 individuals in early 2009. On 28 February 2008 Lucy and Mo Michel salvaged a road-killed mannikin in northeastern Pensacola; the specimen will be deposited at the Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville, Florida. The Pensacola population seems to be expanding westward into Alabama. In September 2004 a mannikin appeared at a feeder at Lillian, Baldwin County, Alabama (Jim Dickerson, pers. comm.), 18 km southwest of Saufley Field. The birds appeared there intermittently through 2007, with as many as 14 in October 2007. Mannikins are now being reported farther west along Highway 180 west of Gulf Shores, Alabama (Jim Dickerson, pers. comm.). The Escambia County Fairground near Saufley Field hosts the annual Southern Bird Expo, at which vendors sell a wide variety of exotics, and this exposition may be the source of the Nutmeg Mannikin population. Several other exotic species, including Pin-tailed Whydah (*Vidua macroura*) and European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), have been seen in the Pensacola area in recent years.

The Nutmeg Mannikin population in the Pensacola area has shown resiliency in the face of adverse weather, having survived two Category 3 hurricanes and many freezes. On 16 September 2004, Hurricane *Ivan*, one of the worst hurricanes in recent history, struck Pensacola with 193 km/h winds and caused severe damage to structures and vegetation. Hurricane *Dennis*, another Category 3 storm with 193 km/h winds, followed on 10 July 2005. Nutmeg Mannikins have also survived north Florida winters that at times have temperatures below freezing. The minimum recorded since their arrival was -7°C on 24 January 2003.

Nutmeg Mannikins were first reported in Florida when three young fledged from a nest at Cocoa Beach, Brevard County, 11 July 1964. Another nest in June 1965 fledged four young in the same county at Merritt Island (Ogden and Stevenson 1965). Since that time, small numbers of mannikins, usually one or two birds, have been observed at Jacksonville (Duval County), from Fort Pierce (St. Lucie County) to Miami (Miami-Dade County), and at Key West (Monroe County). The only other breeding reports are from the Miami area, where the population remains small (Bill Pranty, pers. comm.). The Nutmeg Mannikin appears to have found a niche in suburban Pensacola and may become a permanent feature of the area's avifauna.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank all the observers for sharing their observations and photographs. Betsy Tetlow's regular reports and detailed notes on her mannikins inspired me to write this article. Lucy and Mo Michel's foresight in seeing the value of a road-kill provided the state's first specimen. Lucy Duncan's critical eye on the manuscript helped in its completion. Bill Pranty provided details on the status of the species statewide and commented on the manuscript. Peggy and Verdon Gibbs provided photographs and reports.

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