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THE JUVENILE NUTMEG MANNIKIN: IDENTIFICATION OF A LITTLE BROWN BIRD

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Naturalized nonnative bird species are generally increasing in diversity and abundance in human-modified habitats of North America (Johnston and Garrett 1994, Garrett 1998a). Some of the more recently established species present field identification challenges because they are unfamiliar to many birders and because they may superficially resemble certain native species (Garrett 1998b). This situation is improving with the recent portrayal of many new naturalized taxa in commonly used field guides (National Geographic Society 1999), but considerable potential for confusion remains.

The Nutmeg Mannikin (*Lonchura punctulata*) is now locally fairly common in various parks, residential areas, and flood control channels and basins in coastal southern California (Smithson 1997, Garrett 1998a); it is especially numerous in the river drainages of Los Angeles and Orange counties. Small populations or isolated escapees have been noted in other parts of the state, particularly the San Francisco Bay area. Adults (sexes are similar) are distinctively patterned and easily identified (Restall 1997, National Geographic Society 1999). Considerable geographical variation has been described within the species' native range in India, southeastern Asia, and Indonesia; populations established in California resemble nominate *punctulata* in having black and white scaled ventral plumage, orange-yellow uppertail coverts, and a black bill (Restall 1997). Birds in juvenal plumage, however, are almost uniformly rich tan in color. These "little brown birds" may bear a superficial resemblance to female or immature male *Passerina* buntings, female Blue Buntings (*Cyanocompsa parellina*) or female White-collared Seedeaters (*Sporophila torqueola*, particularly the more richly colored west Mexican *torqueola* group). This dull juvenal coloration is replaced over about a 6-month period after fledging (Restall 1997), and since breeding may occur for much of the year (Smithson 1997) such plumage may be encountered at almost any time.

Despite their drab, featureless appearance (see back cover photo), juvenile Nutmeg Mannikins can readily be told from native North American emberizids and cardinals (including actual or potential strays and escapees from Mexico) by several characters. In body size they are smaller than any *Passerina* or *Cyanocompsa* bunting. They are more similar in size to seedeaters but have a shorter, thinner tail. The bill is blackish slate above (more silvery below), often with a small white mark at the gape, and conical in shape; it lacks the strongly curved culmen of *Sporophila* seedeaters. Female and first basic male plumages of the Varied Bunting (*Passerina versicolor*), a potential vagrant to the current California range of the mannikin, are somewhat similar to the juvenile mannikin. Note the bunting's browner bill with a slightly curved culmen and its longer, broader, and darker tail. Indigo Buntings (*P. cyanea*) in brown plumage show some streaking on the underparts (always lacking in mannikins, though wet plumage may appear streaked). Female Blue Buntings, like the mannikins, have a conical, dark bill; again note the bunting's fuller and darker tail, richer overall color, and larger size.

Always look for evidence of basic plumage as the first prebasic molt begins. The individual featured on the back cover shows one obvious black and white scaled feather on the side of the breast and some deep chestnut feathers on the face.

Three behavioral characters should easily clinch mannikin identification. First,

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juveniles are usually seen in close association with distinctively plumaged adults. Second, juveniles (as well as adults) give a unique “ki-BEE” call; this call can be surprisingly loud for so small a bird, and it is often ventriloquial. Finally, mannikins fly directly with rapid wingbeats and nearly always form tight, cohesive flocks.

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