

An Established Exotic

By Martin Hagne

Every once in a while, a popular bird species kept in captivity is released by pet owners or escapes, and they become successful, start nesting and producing young, and become established as a feral population in the wild. The English settlers, for instance, released House Sparrows, European Starlings, and Rock Doves (city pigeons), all now firmly established across the country.

In more modern times, parrots, parakeets, bulbuls, mynas and other species have established themselves in several Texas cities and areas. Here on the upper Texas coast, for instance, we can find beautiful green Monk Parakeets, natives to South America, and they are expanding.

One such species that is making a rapid expansion of its feral territory is the Scaly-breasted Munia AKA the Nutmeg Mannikin or Spice Finch. A small population started growing from released or escaped pet birds in a Houston neighborhood, and is now spreading into the greater Houston area far and wide, at a rather rapid pace. Last year they even made it to southern parts of Brazoria County, not far from the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's headquarters in Lake Jackson. Although we don't know of any breeding records in Brazoria County yet, I'm sure it's just a matter of time.

While it's a pretty cool looking little bird, it is non-native, and what effects it might have in the wild are yet to be seen. Both Starlings and House Sparrows, albeit having much larger populations, are both a problem for native birds such as Purple Martins, who now have to compete for nest sites with these two exotics. Anytime anything non-native is released into a habitat, it is usually detrimental to native species, often resulting in the native species losing out some way or another. Escaped pet birds (or other type of animals) do not always manage to establish in the wild, due to mostly environmental factors, but when they do, it is almost always a concern.

If you're looking for the Scaly-breasted Munia, keep an eye out for a sparrow-sized birds that seem to travel in groups. They'll tend to be in grasses with seed along roads, parks, and fields. They will also eat small berries and some insects. These birds have also figured out bird feeders and will frequent backyards.

As it so often is in the bird world, the males are more colorful than the females. They have a rusty red head, brown backs, and white spotted undersides, while the females are a subdued brown overall. They are actually finches, and their native lands are in tropical Asia. The Scaly-breasted Munia have managed to establish feral populations in several other countries, beside the U.S., so let's hope they behave themselves! Remember, releasing non-native animals can often harm native wildlife, so keep your exotic pets safe indoors!

Photo by Ecology Asia. Caption: A male Scaly-breasted Munia feeds on grass seed.