

SCALY-BREASTED MUNIA

Lonchura punctulata

Other: Nutmeg Mannikin (1983-2014), Spotted Munia (<1983), Ricebird, *L.p. topela*
Spice Finch, Chinese Sparrow, 'Ai-lakai

naturalized (non-native) resident, long established

Scaly-breasted Munias have been referred to by many common names (see above), including Nutmeg Mannikin from 1984 until changed by the AOU (2014); locally they are commonly referred to as "ricebirds" as they inhabit rice fields among other grassy and open habitats. They are native to India and Nepal E to the Philippine Is and Indonesia (Ali and Ripley 1999, AOU 1998) and they have been introduced to many locations around Australasia and islands of the Indian and Atlantic oceans, as well as Yap and the *Southeastern Hawaiian Islands* in the Pacific (Long 1981, Lever 1987, Pratt et al. 1987, AOU 1998, Higgins et al. 2006). They have also been released on Palau and Tahiti but populations failed to become established.

Scaly-breasted Munias were first brought to Honolulu by W. Hillebrand in Jun or Jul 1866 (not 1865 as often published), with other avian species, after a trip to China, Calcutta, and Java (Meier 2005; see [Common Myna](#) for details). Little is known about its spread through the remainder of the Southeastern Islands but observations of flocks at sea (e.g., 16 photographed 10-20 km off Kona 3 May 2008; [HRBP](#) 5450-5451), on Kaula Rock (see below) and at sea 100 km SE of Kaula 31 Oct 2010 (2 birds; [HICEAS data](#)) suggest that they likely dispersed between islands on their own, as has [African Silverbill](#). In any event, by 1900 they had been recorded on at least *Kaua'i, O'ahu, Moloka'i, Maui, and Hawai'i I* (Henshaw 1900b, 1902a; Rothschild 1900; Bryan and Seale 1901; McGregor 1902, Bryan 1908), and they were subsequently found on all eight islands including *Ni'ihau* proper (Fisher 1951), Lehua Islet (VanderWerf et al. 2007 and up to 60-65 there in May 2010 and Aug 2012), and Kaula Rock (20 in Sep 1976; USNC 2016); *Lana'i* by the 1910-1920s and subsequently considered common (Hirai 1978b, Munro 2007; *E* 27:28); and *Kaho'olawe* during the 1980-2000s (Conant et al. 1983a, Gon et al. 1992, Morin et al. 1998). In Aug 1875 one was collected in Hilo by a local hunter who had never seen one before (Sclater 1878), but by 1900 they were found in "great numbers" on the windward side of Hawai'i I (Henshaw 1900b). Other evidence of continued expansion during the early 1900s is that of Bryan (1905b), who noted them to be much less common in the Waianae Range in 1901 as they were in the valleys behind Honolulu, although this may have been related to habitat preferences or grass seeding phenology at the time, rather than population-expansion dynamics. Observational data through the 20th century indicates highly fluctuating populations likely related to food-related factors (Berger 1972, 1981), and recent data from [Christmas Bird Counts](#) indicates declining populations from the 1970s through 2014 around Kapa'a on Kaua'i ([Graph](#)) and Waipi'o ([Graph](#)) and Honolulu ([Graph](#)) on O'ahu, perhaps related to competition with increasing populations of more-recently arrived Estrilids on these islands (*cf.* Moulton et al. 1990). No trend was evident based on Volcano [Christmas Count](#) data, in an area of Hawai'i I where other Estrilid finches did not expand during the 1970-mid 2010s. Single-location high counts during 2010-2016 include 1,000 at Barking Sands, Kaua'i 23 Feb 2015; 300 at a watercress farm near Pearl City, O'ahu 4 Dec 2013;

150 in the lowlands of Moloka'i 21 Feb 2016; 32 at Manele Bay, Lana'i 14 Jun 2010; 29 on Kaho'olawe 29 Dec 2010; 115 at Hansen Pond, Maui 13 Mar 2014; and 1,000 at Pu'uana'hulu Country Club, Hawai'i I 10 Jan 2015.

Scaly-breasted Munias are found most commonly in lowland fields, open woodlands, and parks, but have been recorded up to 2500 m elevation on Mauna Kea (Berger 1981, Scott et al. 1986), and are occasionally found in openings to native forest (Richardson and Bowles 1964, Shallenberger and Vaughn 1978, Scott et al. 1986, Conant et al. 1998). They can roost in immense flocks in cane fields (*E* 18:43). They were considered a scourge in the 1800s when rice was more commonly cultivated in Hawaii (Henshaw 1902a; W. Bryan 1915; Caum 1933; E. Bryan 1937a, 1940; Berger 1981), especially on Kaua'i (Denny 1999), and "the wholesale trapping and slaughter of tens of thousands" there in 1934 apparently resulted in at least some limited success (Bryan 1937b). The species was looked upon more favorably later in the 1900s after rice production in Hawaii had diminished (Munro 1944, Fisher 1948c); however, over 10,000 were again eradicated from fields around the Lihu'e Airport by U.S. Department of Agriculture officials in Jan-May 1992, for fear that they would interfere with aircraft operations. Scaly-breasted Munias breed year-round in Hawaii (Berger 1981).

Up to 12 subspecies of Scaly-breasted Munia have been recognized (Clements et al. 2016, Gill and Donsker 2016). Although early writers (e.g., Henshaw 1902a, Caum 1933, Bryan 1958) assumed that they were brought from the Malaysian Peninsula, McGregor (1902) applied the Indonesian subspecies *L.p. nisoria* to it (perhaps thinking Hillebrand had picked it up in Java, his last port of call), and Ali and Ripley (1999) attribute Kaua'i birds to *subundulata* of n. India. Specimen examination (PP, USNM) indicates that the subspecies in Hawaii is *topela* of s. China, n. Thailand, Hainan, and Taiwan. It would appear, then, that Hillebrand may have picked up the Scaly-breasted Munias in Hong Kong, his first port of call during his 1865-1866 trip to Asia (Meier 2005).

[Acronyms and Abbreviations](#)

[Literature cited](#)

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