



Keeping and Breeding the Spice Finch **(*Lonchura punctulata*)**

Abridged from an original article printed in “Foreign Birds”

By Matthew Guest

The Spice Finch is one of the most commonly kept *Lonchura* species in UK aviculture, it has other names that are occasionally used such as the Spice Bird, Nutmeg Finch or Scaly-breasted Munia. In the wild it is both common and widespread, described by Restall (1996) as being the most numerous *Munia* in Asia, Consequently there are around 13 races currently described. They are a rich and glossy chestnut brown colour with a brown or black (depending on the race) white scaly chest. The nominate race *L.punctulata* has quite an orangey brown rump where as other races have a more olive brown rump.

A common *Lonchura* trait is that they are difficult to visually sex, there are said to be slight differences in the size and colouration of the face mask and also the mandible, however given the amount of sub-species and possible intergrades this method cannot be entirely accurate, luckily the males are very keen at singing especially with hens about.

As with most *Munias* the Juveniles are a sandy brown colour, and take quite some time to moult through. With imports being long gone and fluctuating popularity and availability, it is very likely that the remaining stock being bred are somewhat mixed up race wise.

After a little selling/swopping with a friend 2 true pairs were made up for the 2011 season. Both pairs were housed together in an indoor flight measuring approximately 6ft long/high and 3ft wide, this was attached to an outdoor flight measuring 12ft by 3.5ft, which the birds had access to from the end of April (weather dependant to start with). Some breeders allow access outside throughout the year. The bird room temperature is maintained at around 16°C and has artificial lighting for a minimum of 12 hours a day.

The basic diet consists of a good selection of seed mixes, as with most *Munias*, Spice Finches have large beaks and relish a great variety of seed, therefore various finch mixtures are given with a little budgie mix added. Cuttlefish, grit and oyster shell is provided at all times, Spice Finches love to bathe so fresh water is always appreciated.

It does not take much to get these birds into condition, the naturally extending day light through the bird room windows from mid-February certainly triggers the cocks into singing, at this point they are given the occasional (around weekly) pot of eggfood mixed in with crushed peas and/or grated carrot. A small pinch of mini-mealworms are also thrown in every 5 days or so to encourage foraging behaviour. As the birds are usually ready to breed before the danger of frosts have passed, breeding outside is generally discouraged, a range of nesting receptacles are put up at the same height in the indoor flight. To give the nesting birds some seclusion artificial plants are stapled around the receptacle – these can be either larger wicker nesting baskets or wooden finch boxes, they are not fussy. The birds kept here remain quite skittish even after a few years, they seem to prefer to nest where they can see you. The cocks display is very typical of a *Lonchura*, they puff out their chests, bob up and down and utter their poor song, after which he will attempt to mate. Nest inspections are tolerated, which is useful for record keeping or closed ringing. Kingston (1998) suggests Spice Finches lay 4 to 6 white eggs, a pair here actually lays 6, 7, and on one occasion 8 eggs!

The eggs will hatch after around 2 weeks, at this point the rearing mix is given twice a day, first thing in the morning before leaving for work and then again at late afternoon after work, the birds do get used to this routine. The mix is as described above, moist eggfood with crushed peas and mini-mealworms, livefood is probably a liberty but they get it anyway as they are housed with other birds. Spice Finches are good sitters and excellent parents – some people are even using them as foster parents. Kingston (1998) writes that fledging occurs at 21 days, some rounds here have been more than 24 days. At fledging there is a great amount of noise and excitement from the parents which includes a good deal of tail flicking, they also fly down to the youngsters to try and shepherd them to a perch. After fledging occurs millet sprays and seeding grass are provided in larger quantities to help the weaning process.

The family will continue to roost in the nest for a time but it is important a week or so after fledging that you replace the receptacle as the birds soon go down to lay again, chicks can be left in the aviary for as long as you wish, as Spice Birds are colony birds they are quite social.

Spice Birds have the potential to be prolific breeders; the birds here are stopped at 3 rounds to give them a rest. It may even be necessary to separate the pairs, as the cocks harass the hens to mate, although no harm should be done he will pluck a few feathers from them hens.