

## WEAVER-FINCHES AND RICE-BIRDS

### Family PLOCEIDÆ

Vol. I., p. 286; Vol. II., p. 270.

IN structure and habits the members of this family are very like the true finches described in the preceding section. They are small birds, with a strong, conical bill and a square or sharply pointed tail. In certain African species known as widow-birds the tail feathers are fantastically lengthened, but this is never so in the Asiatic genera. The dividing line between the finches and the weaver-finches is a thin one, and some ornithologists dispute the position of certain genera, including that of the familiar sparrows (*Passer*), in the classification. The chief difference between the two families is that, whereas the finches have nine primaries, there are ten in the weaver-finches, although in these latter the first feather is small, sometimes very small, and always less than half the length of the second feather. As the distinction between the two families is such a fine one, it is doubtful if any good purpose is served by regarding them as separate.

In many weaver-birds the plumage is gaudy, but in other forms more sombre colours are dominant. The sexes may be alike or quite distinct in plumage. Often there is a characteristic juvenile plumage. In some species there are distinct summer and winter plumages.

The English name of the family is derived from the very elaborate nests of closely woven grass made by some species. The eggs are usually white, but in a few cases they are coloured and spotted.

Weaver-birds are favourite cage-birds in most places where they are found, and Malaya is no exception. Huge numbers of various species are imported into Singapore from Java and elsewhere, and in some places settlements of alien forms are well established.

The family is a large one and is numerically strongest in Africa. Australia is also rich in weaver-birds, which in comparison are poorly represented in the Asiatic tropics.

Nine species occur in the Malay Peninsula, of which six have already been described in detail in the first two volumes of this work. All can be seen in the lowlands except the Malayan bamboo-munia (*Chlorura hyperythra malayana*), a rare mountain bird of which only one specimen has ever been obtained. A seventh species is dealt with below, but the remaining two are essentially open-country birds, and their detailed notice will, therefore, be included in our next and last volume.

In their habits the weaver-birds are gregarious, assembling at times in huge flocks, usually frequenting open country and feeding on grass seeds and grain. In some districts the several species of *Munia* are ricefield pests and their depredations are serious. Under favourable conditions they will breed when the rice is opening, rearing several broods in a season, and will leave a district after the harvest.

In addition to the truly indigenous Malayan species, certain other forms originally imported as cage-birds have from time to time established themselves with varying fortune on Singapore Island. These include the tiny red "amadavats" of aviculturists (*Amandava* spp.) in which the males are bright red spotted with white, and the Javanese form of the white-bellied munia (*Uroloncha leucogastra leucogastroides*).

KEY TO THE LOWLAND SPECIES OF WEAVER-FINCHES AND RICE-BIRDS

1	{	Back, dove-grey . . . . .	<i>Munia oryzivora</i> , p. 371
		Back, green . . . . .	<i>Erythrura p. prasina</i> , p. 374
		Back, pale brown, heavily streaked with darker brown	<i>Ploceus passerinus infortunatus</i> , p. 370
2	{	Back, brown to chestnut . . . . .	2
		Head all round, deep black . . . . .	<i>Munia atricapilla</i> subspp. (adult), p. 371
		Head all round, white . . . . .	<i>Munia m. maja</i> (adult), p. 371
3	{	Head not as above . . . . .	3
		Whole plumage more or less uniform pale brown	<i>Munia m. maja</i> , <i>M. atricapilla</i> subspp. and <i>Uroloncha punctu-</i> <i>lata fretensis</i> (young)
		Plumage patterned . . . . .	4
4	{	Chin and throat, deep brownish black; abdomen, pure white . . . . .	<i>Uroloncha l. leucogastra</i> , p. 372
		Chin and throat, brownish; abdomen, not white . . . . .	5
		Tail, black; abdomen, grey . . . . .	<i>Uroloncha striata subsquamicollis</i> , p. 372
5	{	Tail, straw-colour; abdomen, boldly squamate	<i>Uroloncha punctulata fretensis</i> (adult), p. 374

*Ploceus passerinus infortunatus*

The Malay Weaver-Finch

Vol. I., p. 286.

In breeding plumage the male has the top of the head bright yellow, the cheeks and most of the throat blackish grey, the upper parts pale brown, boldly streaked with blackish brown, and the under parts tawny. Young birds, females and males in non-breeding plumage lack the yellow and black on the head. They are dull-coloured birds, with the upper parts pale brown

streaked with darker brown, and the under parts pale tawny brown, becoming almost creamy white on the abdomen.

Total length, about 6 in. ; wing, 2·7 in.

A common seed-eating bird, usually found in flocks in the vicinity of ricefields and near the banks of large rivers. The species is well known on account of its peculiar nesting habits. The large inverted bottle-shaped nests of woven grass are to be seen in colonies, sometimes consisting of a score or more nests, in trees. A peculiar feature of the colony is the presence of incomplete nests, which are usually regarded as "playgrounds" for the males. Local nests have been found from January to October. Eggs measure about 0·82 by 0·57 in.

*Munia oryzivora*

**The Java Sparrow**

Vol. I., p. 288.

Sexes alike. Top of the head, throat and tail, black ; cheeks, white ; upper parts and breast, pale lavender-grey ; abdomen, pale greyish pink.

Total length, about 5·5 in. ; wing, 2·6 in.

The Java sparrow has been introduced into so many parts of Malaysia that it is now difficult to decide where it is really indigenous, but on a balance of evidence it seems to be native to Java and Bali : Sumatra is less certain. It is well established in Singapore.

*Munia maja maja*

**The White-headed Munia**

Vol. I., p. 289, pl. 24 (*upper figures*).

Sexes very much alike. Head all round, pure white ; upper parts and sides of the body, chestnut-brown with a slight maroon gloss ; breast pale hair-brown ; centre of the abdomen, black. Young birds are very pale brown, darkest on the upper parts, and entirely without distinctive markings.

Total length, about 4 in. ; wing, 2·1 in.

This species is common almost everywhere in the Malay Peninsula where there is cultivation and open country. It breeds in all months of the year in "bushes, hedges, trees, palms, inside a large canna leaf, or even in pineapple-beds, at any height from two to fifteen feet from the ground" (*Edgar*). Local eggs measure about 0·64 by 0·47 in.

*Munia atricapilla sinensis*

**The Malayan Black-headed Munia**

Head and neck all round and the breast, black ; remainder of the plumage, chestnut, darkest on the centre of the abdomen, palest, almost brownish drab, on the mantle, and brightening to reddish sienna on the rump ; upper tail coverts and tail washed with golden yellow. Bill and feet, pale blue-grey.

Young birds are brown from head to tail, palest, almost tawny-buff on the under parts.

Total length, about 4.3 in. ; wing, 2 in.

Birds from the north of the Peninsula average rather deeper in colour and darker on the abdomen, and must be referred to the typical race, *M. a. atricapilla*.

A very common bird in the Malay Peninsula, where it occurs in flocks in the ricefields and wherever there are open spaces and tracts of grass. It also enters the town gardens and is numerous in most cultivated areas. Breeds from December to May and in September, in coarse grass (*lalang*) or low bushes, from nine inches to four feet above ground-level. Local eggs measure 0.64 by 0.46 in.

### *Uroloncha striata subsquamicollis*

#### The Malayan Sharp-tailed Munia

Vol. I., p. 289, pl. 24 (*lower figures*); Vol. II., p. 272.

Sexes alike. Tail, long and pointed. Rump, white; remaining upper parts, dark brown turning to almost black on the forehead, wings and tail. The mantle and back with thin whitish shaft streaks. Throat and breast, dark brown, the feathers of the breast with paler margins. Abdomen, greyish white, indistinctly marbled with darker grey.

Total length, about 4.5 in. ; wing, 1.9 in.

A common open-country bird, but less of a ricefield species than the white-headed munia, and found more frequently than that species in secondary growth, along paths through forest, and in jungle clearings. According to Mr A. T. Edgar it breeds in fruit trees between seven and twelve feet from the ground, generally not far from the outer end of a branch. Season, January to August. Local eggs measure about 0.6 by 0.42 in.

### *Uroloncha leucogastra leucogastra*

#### The White-bellied Munia

Vol. II., p. 272.

*Amandina leucogastra* Blyth, *Asiat. Soc. Bengal*, xv., 1846, p. 286 (Malacca).

*Uroloncha leucogastra*, Sharpe, *Cat. Birds, Brit. Mus.*, xiii., 1890, p. 362; Oates, in Hume's *Nests and Eggs Ind. Birds* (2nd ed.), ii., 1890, p. 135; Oates, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds*, ii., 1890, p. 186; O.-Grant, *Cat. Birds' Eggs, Brit. Mus.*, v., 1912, p. 338.

*Munia leucogastra leucogastra*, Robinson and Kloss, *Journ. Nat. Hist. Soc. Siam*, v., 1924, p. 363.

*Uroloncha leucogastra leucogastra*, Stuart Baker, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds* (2nd ed.), iii., 1926, p. 87; Stuart Baker, *Nid. Birds Ind. Emp.*, iii., 1934, p. 22.

**Malay Name.**—Unascertained; probably pipit padi or chiak (generic).

**Description.**—A small finch-like bird, dark brown, with the abdomen white and sharply defined against the breast and flanks.

**Adult.**—Sexes alike. Loes, chin, throat, breast, sides of the body, thighs, under tail coverts, rump and upper tail coverts, sooty black, almost black on the tail coverts and centre of the throat. Remainder of head and upper parts, including wing quills, paler brown, with long, thin, whitish shaft streaks less marked on the crown. Abdomen white, or creamy white, sharply defined and running up into the breast in a wedge shape. Under wing coverts, whitish tinged with buff. Edge of the wing, mixed brown and white. Tail quills, dark brown, narrowly fringed with straw-yellow, the centre pair slightly longer, pointed and mostly straw-yellow.

**Immature.**—The dark parts both above and below are almost uniformly brown, only the throat and under tail coverts being rather darker. White shaft stripes of the upper surface less conspicuous than in adults, and absent on the head. The centre tail feathers not lengthened.

**Soft Parts.**—Iris, brown; upper mandible, black; lower mandible and feet, slaty grey.

**Dimensions.**—Total length, 4 to 4.25 in.; wing, 1.9 to 2 in.; tail, 1.35 to 1.4 in.; bill from gape, 0.4 in.; culmen, 0.41 in.

**Range in the Malay Peninsula.**—Peninsular Siam, including Junk Zeylon. The lowlands of Perak, Pahang, Selangor and Malacca. The hills of Negri Sembilan; Mt Ophir on the Malacca-Johore boundary. Not recorded from any island other than Junk Zeylon.

**Extralimital Range.**—Tenasserim. Sumatra and Borneo. The species is represented in Java and Bali by *U. leucogastra leucogastroides*, and there is also a Philippine representative.

**Nidification.**—Nests containing eggs taken near Taiping in Perak from March to May are described by Mr Stuart Baker as very loosely and roughly made of fine grass, flowering grass ends, etc., and of the usual domed munia type with no special lining. The nests were in forest near villages, and placed a few feet from the ground in bushes. The white eggs measure about 0.6 by 0.45 in.

**Habits.**—In the Malay Peninsula this bird is very locally distributed, and much less of an open-country species than the other members of the genus. It prefers the forest clearings and the wooded edges of cultivated areas where these are backed by forest, rather than the ricefields favoured by its congeners. It is common in some places at low elevations on the Negri Sembilan hills and in parts of the Pahang lowlands, but it seems not to occur in other large tracts of the lowlands apparently suited to its habits. Davison collected it at Klang, but it is uncommon in Selangor. I know of no record from south of Mt Ophir, or from the north-eastern Malay States where, however, it is almost certain to occur. According to Davison it is common at several places along the Pakchan estuary. This author confirms that it is "much more of a forest-loving species than the other muniias, and I have not infrequently met with it in dense forest many miles from any clearing or other open space, and I have found it breeding quite in the depths of the forest."

On the few occasions on which I have met with the species it has been in small, rather shy flocks, and in the Malay States at least, it appears not to congregate in such large flocks as do those species of munias that prefer more open country.

*Note.*—Another subspecies of this bird, the Javan white-bellied munia (*Uroloncha leucogastra leucogastroides*), is commonly imported into Singapore as a cage-bird, and escaped birds not infrequently form small colonies in various parts of the island, but the form seems to find difficulty in establishing itself. In *leucogastroides* the line of demarcation between the black throat and white breast is straight: in *leucogastra* it is wedge-shaped and the dark brown of the breast is continued as a broad band down each side of the body.

*Uroloncha punctulata fretensis*

**The Malayan Spotted Munia**

Upper parts, pale cinnamon-brown; rump and upper tail coverts, barred dirty white and dusky; tail, washed with yellow. Throat, darker chestnut-brown than the upper parts; remaining under parts, white, the feathers narrowly edged with brown, producing a scaled or boldly spotted effect.

Total length, about 4.3 in.; wing, about 2 in.

This munia occurs in flocks in the ricefields, open country, and in the vicinity of villages. It is common in most parts of the Peninsula where there is country suited to its habits, and it freely enters the town gardens. According to Mr A. T. Edgar, it breeds in the tops of areca and sealing-wax palms (*Cyrtostachys*) at a height of from twelve to eighteen feet from the ground. The eggs measure about 0.61 by 0.43 in.

*Erythrura prasina prasina*

**The Malay Long-tailed Munia**

Vol. II., p. 270.

The tail is long, tapering and pointed in the male. Upper parts, grass-green; upper tail coverts and tail, crimson. Forehead, chin and throat, dull blue; remaining under parts, deep buff, except for a large crimson patch on the centre of the abdomen. Females have little or no blue on the head, and no crimson on the abdomen.

Total length of the long-tailed male, about 6 in.; wing, 2.3 in.

In the extreme north of the Peninsula this handsome munia has been found fairly commonly in forest and on the edges of ricefields, but in the Malay States it is by no means a common bird, and very few specimens have been collected.