



## The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

PO Box 248, Panania NSW 2213, Australia

# Pictorella Mannikins (*Heteromunia pectoralis*)

(ASNSW meeting - February 2014)

Presented by Sarah Moncrieff

## Introduction

The reason I chose to do my talk on Pictorella Mannikins is because we have recently acquired two Pictorella Mannikins at Featherdale Wildlife Park where I am working as a keeper; something different for us in the park that we haven't had before.

I didn't really know a lot about them so I thought it would be something cool to research and share my findings with you.

## Description

It is pretty hard to tell young males and females apart. When we received the two Pictorellas they were juveniles so they both looked exactly the same. They both had pretty much the brown down feathers and they had the start of colouring coming through on their faces. The easiest way to tell is that the males have a black mask around their face. The females have a brown mask. So that's one pretty easy way to differentiate between them. The male has got really nice white speckles on his chest. The females do get this as well, however the white doesn't come out as much, so it's more like black barring on their chest.



Photo of juvenile Pictorella Mannikin.  
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Photo of juvenile Pictorella Mannikin.  
© Ian Montgomery [birdway.com.au](http://birdway.com.au)

## Distribution

In the wild they are found in North Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. There have also been a couple spotted down in South Australia which I found pretty interesting.

They used to be found quite commonly in captivity but unfortunately when they were caught around the 1960s and 1970s not a lot was known about them, which is why you don't see them so often in captivity now. Although in saying that, quite a few breeders do have them but they are not really display birds anymore.

## Housing

At Featherdale we obviously had to keep them in a quarantine facility when they first arrived.

Remembering where their natural habitat is in North Queensland and all around the northern areas you will find that they are more from drier arid areas, also where there is lots of grasses like tussocks or spinifexes.

So when you are housing them it is important to remember where they naturally come from. A pretty hot climate obviously so having them in a warmer area is obviously the best.

So this is our aviary at the park.



You can see that it is quite an arid enclosure.

We've got red sand on the bottom and there is a lot of different perchings for them.

Pictorellas are probably best known for bathing so obviously because they are found in such warm areas they do like to cool themselves off by having a bath.

It is therefore important to make sure that they have the area and space to be able to do that.



Pictorella Mannikin, adult cock (black mask).  
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## Housing in a mixed species exhibit

We have the Pictorella Mannikins in a mixed species exhibit with Peaceful Doves, Diamond Doves, Crimson Chats, Diamond Firetails, the Masked Finch, and we've got Long-tailed Finches in the aviary as well.

We did have Spinifex Pigeons in there but we had to take them out. One of the main reasons for taking the Spinifex Pigeons out was because they are a ground bird and when breeding Pictorella Mannikins it is important to make sure that the Pictorellas have ground space. I will talk about that a little more later.



Pictorella Mannikin, adult cock (black mask).  
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## Natural behaviours

So like I said, Pictorellas love to bath. They are pretty hardy little birds and they are also very shy. So when they first came into the park we were interested to see what their behaviour was like and what they would be doing. I was actually really excited and eager to keep my eye on them and observe what was happening when they were first put out into the aviary. Within two weeks we saw their colours change dramatically and I was starting to think to myself am I seeing things? Am I starting to get excited over nothing here? But we definitely had one male and we definitely had one female! What we thought was their pin feathers was their adult plumage coming through because they were starting to mature. They mature around 9 months of age and so we estimate that ours are around that age now.

## Feeding and suitable diets

Finches and Mannikins love to eat seed. The Pictorella Mannikins favour the French white millet. We know this just from our observations of them in the park. We feed them greens as a bit of a treat for them and it is something that encourages them to feed. Their favourite is definitely the sprouts. So we collect sprouts and scatter them across the ground. They come down to the ground to feed on them because they are ground foraging birds and they get pretty excited. It is also pretty important to feed live food to them as well as it is something that definitely stimulates them. Coming into the breeding season you have got to add live food to their food whether that's termites, mealworms or maggots as well, we scatter them on the ground so that they can perform their natural feeding behaviours.



## Breeding and courtship

With finches and Mannikins a lot of them are really similar in their behaviour during breeding season. Some males will pick up a piece of grass; usually it is fine grass like tussocks or Spinifex grass. We cut a lot of November grass for our birds because we find that they like to create their nests with the really light weight grasses. Painted finches do the exactly the same things that the Pictorellas do. The male will snap off a piece of grass and he will bob around the female on the ground. That was part of the reason why we had to remove the Spinifex Pigeons from the enclosure because they need the ground space to be able to perform this behaviour. I did see the male starting to do this however he didn't have the grass in-between his beak so I was a little bit disappointed. The males will bob around the females and try to present to her, they'll then start to drop their tails and that is when the female will decide whether or not she is going to go there.

## Breeding - providing material for nesting

These birds will not use nesting boxes. Out in the wild they will create their nest amongst the low grasses; in captivity generally they will nest at a height of two metres and below.

I was pretty excited because the male started to use what was an old Diamond Dove's nest and they started to create feathers which I have read from all the literature that these birds use for lining their nest when the female is going to lay. However I got a little bit too excited, they were just pruning themselves and making a comfortable area for themselves. This was something that was a bit different because from everything that I had read about them it said that these birds don't like to have hiding spaces; they actually like to sit out in the open flight zones.



Pictorella Mannikin, juvenile.  
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## Breeding - what to know

During the breeding season there are a couple of things to make sure that you do or you do not do.

If you do see them nesting it is important to try and keep your distance. These birds are like a lot other birds, if you go too close to the nest they will simply abandon it and they will start to break their own eggs. They just freak out big time. So when you start to see this sort of behaviour it is important to monitor what's going on, to feed lots of the live food because that is really important for the young, but also make sure you are not getting too close to stress them out.

## Breeding - parenting

Generally when they lay their eggs they have between three and four eggs in a clutch. The incubation period varies between 26 to 30 days which is something that I found interesting; and they fledge at around 21 days.

## Known health issues

So just some things to look out for with this type of bird...

Because they are found in the more northern areas they are prone to getting chills quite easily so where we have located them in the park is an area where they are pretty enclosed. It's also in a quieter area. We do have Ngukhur (Noo-kah), who is our big saltwater crocodile, across from this aviary, so the only time of the day there are noises is when they do the croc demonstration, but other than that they are in a really quiet area. That is what we felt was best for them.

Obesity is probably like every other bird that I have come in contact with in that sometimes as keepers or avian members we can feed our birds a little bit too much, and because they are not being as active as they would in the wild, they can get a bit plump.

Because they are a ground feeder, coccidia and worms is something to look out for so worming birds is obviously very important. At the park we generally worm our birds around 3 times per year.

Lastly, overgrown toenails. Again because they are not as active as they would be out in the wild, if you don't have correct perching, or you don't have different variations of perching and the birds can't move around, they are not actually filing down their toenails as they would be out in the wild. So it is important to keep an eye on that and obviously having suitable perching would help to prevent that.

## Questions and comments

### What are you sprouting for them Sarah?

We don't sprout anything for them, we just give them the basic finch seed and we buy sprouts, the type that you and I would eat in a salad. We mix it up with maggots and mealworms and spread it around for them just so that they have got movement.

### What like Alfalfa sprouts?

Yes. They absolutely love it. If you watch them they will come down to the ground and roll it around in their beak and they play with it for ages. We put normal greens like endives and spinach and other greens in for them but they don't really tend to take to it, they like the smaller things that they can take away and play with.

### Do you have one pair per aviary or can you keep more pairs together?

You can keep a few pairs together. Usually when you see them in the wild they can be in really big numbers. I have read that there can be 80 to 100 birds in one flock together.

### What do you worm them with?

Wormout Gel.

### Do you put that in the water?

No. In the crop.

### There are two different types, one is water based and the other is oil based. So the oil based is the one you are giving them?

Yes, but you still have to dilute it. You don't give it to them straight. You have to be very, very careful how you are giving it to them because of the risk of high toxicity levels if you give them an incorrect dosage. You can use the Wormout Gel but you have to know exactly what you are giving them.

Because they are on the ground so much you can use a nematode wormer as well.

*(Readers are advised to seek advice from an Avian Veterinarian in relation to the correct procedures and worming doses that are best for your birds.)*

### Do you require a licence to keep Pictorella Mannikins?

I am not too sure. I have a feeling that you would. You don't see them in pet shops. The only people that I could find that have them are private breeders.

*(Paul Henry commented that for Pictorellas and Chestnut Mannikins you need a licence, Firetails you don't. Readers should make their own enquiries as in some cases this may vary across Australian Government sites. We have endeavoured to include some helpful information on our [links page](#).)*

### Can they handle larger mealworms?

Yes, when you watch them feed they don't take the whole worm and swallow it down, they chew at it bit by bit and they actually use their claw to hold it while they nibble at it. Even when we feed ours quite small mealworms that chew at it, they don't take it whole.

**And you feed them maggots as well?**

Yes, we put maggots and termites in the enclosures for them.

**Being a tropical bird do they follow the same breeding pattern as they would in tropical areas in the wild?**

Yes, they can breed all year round in captivity. Northern areas they breeding in the spring and summer season but in captivity they have been known to breed in the colder months as well.

**It is the wet season that triggers them to breed in the wild.**

Yes it is.

**Maybe feeding them sprouts all year round gives them the incentive to breed outside their normal season.**

Obviously our diets increase and decrease out of the natural season. During the warmer months we tend to bring on the food leading into the breeding season and then in the colder months with slacken off with the live food. We just give them fresh termites.

*(Everyone joined together in thanking Sarah for her very interesting presentation on Pictorella Mannikins.)*

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