

# Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,  
Jim Butler



## LOCAL MANNIKINS

Ed's photo almost says it all! Chestnut-breasted Mannikins are finches which eat half-ripe grass seeds on the stalk. Their habitat is lantana thickets and grasslands near water across the north and down the east-coast of Australia. They build their low globular nests with green grass stems and line them with plant down. They are a highly sociable species, flocking in large numbers and bunching into tight-flying packs that execute rapid synchronized manoeuvres. They also rest, nest, sleep, feed and drink together. Both parents build the nest in tall grass, incubate the eggs and feed the young.

Strangely, but beautifully, Mannikin chicks display stunning colour patterns when they beg inside the enclosed nest. There is controversy concerning the function of mouth markings in nestling finches. One possible function could be to guide the parent bird to the mouth of the young chick in the dark nest cavity. These high contrast markings combined with begging cries may increase the efficiency of the parents' feeding of the chicks. Alternatively, the function of the highly visible patterns on the palate of a gaping chick's mouth and the reason why each species has its own unique pattern, might be to identify their own chicks in the nest from another finch species or a parasitic

species deposited in the nest.

Predictably, the Brisbane Mannikins weigh significantly more than the Mannikins from northern Australia. This is expected from Bergmann's Rule which is a recognized generalization in zoology. Within the Mannikins, the Rule states that they will have increasing body size with increasing latitude and attendant decreasing ambient temperature. The explanation for the Rule is found in the surface area to volume ratio for different shapes. Birds in colder climates can reduce heat loss by reducing the surface area to volume ratio by growing larger.

Enjoy the Local Mannikins

~ Jim

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Image: Chestnut-breasted Mannikin  
by Ed Frazer at Brookfield