Distribution and Status of Mynas in American Samoa

by Pepper W. Trail

The Common Myna (Acridotheres tristis) and the Jungle Myna (A. fuscus), both native to India, are widely established as breeding birds on islets of the Pacific. (Pratt et al. 1987, Watling 1982). The purpose of this note is to provide current information on the status of the two species in American Samoa, with brief notes on Western Samoa.

The Common Myna was first reported from American Samoa in October 1980, when a single individual was seen at the Rainmaker Hotel in Utulei, on the west side of Pago Pago Bay, Tutuila (Pottet 1981) (see Fig. 1). This species was not present during extensive field surveys of American Samoa birds carried out during 1972 and 1976 (Amerson et al. 1982). By 1985-86, the species had spread, and was seen regularly around the harbor, the airport, and the heavily wooded Tutuana Point, west to Leone (Fig. 1), where a pair was seen (Engbring and Ramsey 1986). The largest flock noted was seven birds near the Rainmaker Hotel. Engbring and Ramsey (1989:75) noted, "it is unlikely that the population has reached a peak and we expect that it will grow in future years . . . . We recommend that the population be eradicated ... At present, the Common Myna is restricted to a relatively small area on Tutuila, and it should be possible to remove this small population."

No attempt at eradication was made. The observations reported here were made from February 1992 to December 1993. The Common Myna is now common throughout the area reported by Engbring and Ramsey, extending from Pago Pago Harbor through the Tutuana Point, and west to Leone. There are the most developed parts of the island, with significant areas of lawns, bare earth, and pavement, providing mynas with their favored foraging sites. Interestingly, the population has increased within the most suitable areas, but has not markedly expanded its range. I have never seen Common Mynas north of the central ridge of the island or east of Pago Pago Harbor. Although there are villages on the eastern part of Tutuila that seem to provide open areas sufficient to support mynas (e.g., Fagatuitu, Tolate, Fig. 1), the species has not yet moved along the narrow corridor provided by the coastal road to reach these areas.

The current size of the Common Myna population is unknown, but certainly exceeds 1000 birds. I have not located any large roosts. Flocks of 10-20 are common, especially in the Utulei and Tutuana areas. Breeding (indicated by the carrying of nestling material or food into holes) has been observed from Pago Pago to Leone.

The Common Myna thus appears to be firmly established on Tutuila, and could be eradicated only with the greatest difficulty. If at all. Fortunately, this species has not yet reached the Manu'a Islands (Ofu, Olosega, and Ta'u) 60 miles east of Tutuila.

The Jungle Myna was first reported in American Samoa in July 1986, when four birds were seen at the airport in the Tutuana area of Tutuila (Engbring and Ramsey 1989). In July 1987, Engbring again saw a pair at the airport. He wrote, "The fact that birds have been on the island for at least a year, and that pairs appear to be nesting, would indicate that a population may soon be established. This species, perhaps more than the Common Myna, has potential for disrupting native ecosystems because it is able to thrive in and use habitats that have many native components. We strongly recommend that an eradication program be initiated" (Engbring and Ramsey 1989:74).

No attempts at eradication were made. The Jungle Myna is now a well-established breeding bird on Tutuila, and may have a population even larger than that of the Common Myna. The species' range on Tutuila is very similar to that of the Common Myna: neither species yet occurs on the eastern or northern parts of the island. However, the

Figure 1. Range of Common and Jungle Mynas on Tutuila, American Samoa. Both species are found throughout the shaded area; only the Jungle Myna occurs as far west as Faga'i'a. Neither myna has yet spread east of Pago Pago Bay. Most of the mountainous northern side of Tutuila is probably unsuitable for mynas because of dense forest and presence of human sinistrors. Sts. 1-Faga'i'a; 2-Leone; 3-Ofu; 4-Tutuana; 5-Mainland; 6-Ofu; 7-Pago Pago; 8-Fagatogo; 9-Tutuila.
range of the Jungle Myna extends farther west, and the centers of abundance of the two species are different. The Common Myna is most common in the heavily urbanized Pago-Pago Bay area (sites 6 and 7, Fig. 1); the Jungle Myna habitat ranges in the Fatu-Olo and Leone areas (sites 2 and 3, Fig. 1). It is particularly conspicuous at the Tutuila landfill, located in an area of young second growth and containment plant near Fatu-Olo. Plot 150, 100 Jungle Mynas are often seen here, but Common Mynas are infrequently seen, and never in large numbers. Both species are common in the Tall, Black, around Aipotu, and the nearby Daniel K. Inouye Industrial Park (sites 4 and 5, Fig. 1). In September 1992, Jungle Mynas were observed west of Leone for the first time, in the village of Afa. By June 1993 they had spread to Fagatogo at the far western end of Tutuila (site 1, Fig. 1), where they are apparently breeding.

I have never seen either myna during bird surveys in primary and well-developed secondary forest habitats on Tutuila. However, Jungle Mynas occur in secondary forest on the island of 'Upoon, Western Samoa,' located 60 miles west of Tutuila Jungle Mynas probably reached 'Upoon in the early to mid-1990s (see discussion below). It is possible that as myna populations continue to expand on Tutuila, the Jungle Myna, at least, will invade forest habitats that are more disturbed and less conflict with native bird species.

The effects of the two myna species on native bird populations in Samoa are unknown. On Midway, where seabird eggs are abundant and other resources are scarce, Common Mynas have been observed to prey on the eggs and young of White Terns (Gygis alba) and Black Noddies (Anous tenuirostris) (Grant 1982). This has not been observed on Tutuila. The effects of the mynas are difficult to separate from those of another introduced bird, the Red-spotted Bulbul (Pyconotus cifer), which arrived in 'Upoon in the 1940s and Tutuila in 1958 (Muss and Muss 1982). Moreover, the Samoan archipelago was struck by major hurricanes in February 1990 and December 1991, which caused extensive damage to forest habitats and significantly reduced native bird populations (Lovegrove et al. 1992, Park et al. 1992, Trill 1992), perhaps swamping any effect of alien birds.

Based on diet and nest site, the mynas are potential competitors for the following native Samoan birds: Collard Kingfisher (Halcyon chloris; American Sams) and Flat-tailed Kingfisher (H. recurvirostris; Western Samoa); Samoan Starling (Aplonis affinis); and Polynesian Starling (A. gouldii); and Wattle Honeyeater (Leiopicus camelliae), as well as for the wintering Pacific Golden-Plover (Pluvialis fulva).

The native bird that appears to be most similar to the Jungle Myna in its ecology and behavior is the confamilial Samoan Starling (Aplonis affinis), a species endemic to the Samoan islands. Like the myna, the starling nests in tree cavities and has an opportunistic diet of fruit and insects. Watling (1982:104) commented, "it will be interesting to see if the Samoan Starling, which is an introduced species, in any way checks the spread of the recently introduced Jungle Mynah, on "Upton." The abundance of the Jungle Myna on "Upton today suggests that the starling has had little or no effect on its spread. On the other hand, the Samoan Starling continues to be a common species on "Upton, even in suburban and agricultural habitats where the Jungle Myna is most abundant. However, no data are available on starling abundance before and after the introduction of the myna in Western Samoa.

Given the proximity of the Manu'a Islands to Tutuila, the further spread of the mynas in American Samoa is possible. It is important that a vigorous eradication campaign be mounted as soon as mynas (or bulbuls) are detected on these islands, which are as yet free from introduced bird species.

Notes on the Jungle Myna and Common Myna in Western Samoa

The history of the Common and Jungle Mynas in Western Samoa is confused because of problems with the identification of the two species. However, a review of the literature makes it clear that the Jungle Myna reached Western Samoa well before the Common Myna. This is the reverse of the sequence in American Samoa.

No mynas were observed by ornithologists visiting the Samoan islands in 1957 and 1960 (Bryan and Keith 1957; Dunmore 1960). The first published observation of mynas in Western Samoa was by Green (1965). He visited 'Upon from May to June, 1965, and noted an "introduced Mynah, (Acridotheres tristis)."

He did not provide a description, but noted, "Often seen in Apana (the capital of Western Samoa, on the island of 'Upton), but does not appear to have spread as yet beyond the town area." Dhondt made observations on Western Samoa birds during 1973-'74. Unaware of Green's note, he reported mynas, identified as A. tristis, as a new record, characterizing them as "well established," but also noting that they occurred in the Apia area only (Dhondt 1976). The first definite report of the Jungle Myna on Western Samoa was by Watling (1978). He noted that, contrary to Dhondt (1976), the myna found in Apana was the Jungle Myna. "Upton 1978, Child (1979) confirmed Watling's identification, and noted, "We saw only a few small groups of up to six birds in the casuarina of Apia... none were seen elsewhere around the coast or in the hill forests,... it seems to be rather uncommon and localised." Finally, June and Muss (1987) and also noted a photograph of Acridotheres fuscus, correctly identified by scientific name. The description, however, mentions bare yellow skin behind the eye; this is a characteristic of the Common Myna, not the Jungle Myna. The vernacular name given is simply "Myna."

The first authenticated record of the Common Myna for Western Samoa dates from 1988 (Beechle 1989). Beechle, who worked on Western Samoa from 1977-'84 without observing this species, reported that small numbers of A. tristis were seen throughout the Apia area from June-August 1988. He recorded a total of 24 birds, which he stated on his list. He also noted that by 1988, in contrast to 1977-'84, Jungle Mynas were "seen all over "Upton."

I observed mynas in Western Samoa during several visits: "Upton 1982, 15-17 September, 1992, 26-27 January, 1993, and 30 January-2 February, 1993; Savai'i: 26-29 January, 1993). During these visits, Jungle Mynas were abundant and conspicuous in Apia. They were also seen in well-developed secondary forest on Mt. Vaea on the outskirts of the city, and in villages and plantation land on the north, east, and south coasts, including Lalomanu and Toigotiga. Jungle Mynas were the only myna species observed on Savai'i, where small flocks were not observed in Saleloga, Ta'afa, and Sili in the southeastern corner of the island.

In contrast, the Common Myna was only seen in Apia, and was relatively uncommon. For example, I counted 41 Jungle Mynas but only 4 Common Mynas foraging on a rugby field in Apia on 17 September. It seems possible that the spread of the Common Myna on "Upton may have been inhibited by the already established Jungle Myna. Consistent with this, the Common Myna appears to be less common on "Upton than on Tutuila, despite the fact that Apia (population 35,000) offers more suitable urban habitats than do the smaller villages of Tutuila.
Where Goeth the 'Elepaio? We Need to Hear from You
by Lynne Madsen, Managing Editor

The Hawaii Audubon Society Board of Directors is evaluating the future role and format of the 'Elepaio. In this effort, we need to hear from you, the member of Hawaii Audubon. The 'Elepaio is the voice and the 5 decades of Hawaii Audubon.

As Hawaii Audubon continues to expand several of its educational and conservation programs, including the Paradise Pauwai environmental quilt show for high school students, oiled wildlife rehabilitation training, the awarding of research grants, and legislative action, your Board of Directors is struggling with how to pay for the increased expenses. We are continuing our fundraising activities and have applied to foundations for grants.

One of the cost items we are examining is the 'Elepaio. It costs more than $640 per year per member to print and mail the 'Elepaio. This is the largest single budget item ($18,000), at 20% of Hawaii Audubon's budget, and it will increase as the proposed new postage rates take effect.

Historically the 'Elepaio has published scientific articles, which normally would not appear elsewhere, blended with local environmental news and chapter events. As such, it is an important source of information on the conservation history of Hawaii.

The Hawaii Audubon Society Board of Directors needs to hear from you, the members, as we consider how to restructure the 'Elepaio to contain its costs. The Board is currently considering reducing the number of pages, the number of issues, or the focus of the publication.

We welcome your input on this matter and urge you to complete the following questionnaire and return it no later than 1 May.

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