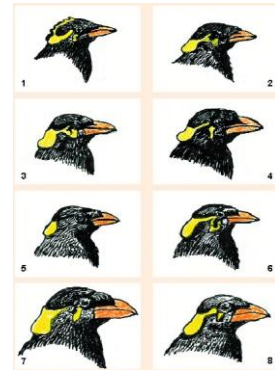


# Mynah Birds

*This text provides an introduction to the family of mynahs worldwide followed by a closer inspection of two of the most common species, the Hill Mynahs (*Gracula religiosa*) and the Common Mynahs (*Acridotheres tristis*).*

**M**ynahs are birds of the starling family (*Sturnidae*), the word *mynah* being a local name for starlings from India and surrounding countries. In the west, we are most familiar with mynahs as entertaining cage birds, with an ability to vocalise human words. In the wild there are in the order of thirty species of mynah, some, but not all of which, are good vocal mimics. They are closely related to that other group of avian impressionists, the Mimids (mockingbirds and thrashers) of North America. The native homes of starlings and mynahs are scattered across Eurasia, Africa and Australasia. Mynahs' closest relations in Europe are our Common Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Some mynah species are now considered invasive in countries outside their natural range (e.g. North America, Australia & New Zealand and some Pacific Islands). Mynahs form the bulk of the genera *Acridotheres*, *Ampeliceps*, *Basilornis*, *Enodes*, *Gracula*, *Gracupica*, *Leucopsar*, *Mino*, *Scissirostrum* and *Streptocitta* and many other starling genera are often referred to as mynahs. Most mynahs are black or dark with the exception of the critically endangered Bali Mynah (*Leucopsar rothschildi*) which is largely white. This inverted 'black sheep' is now one of the rarest birds in world, exploited for its oddness.



The word 'mynah' or 'myna' derives from the Hindi word *mainā*, a term of endearment used for pets, children and favoured females. *Mainā* itself derives from the Sanskrit *madana*, meaning joyful or delightful. It is also said to mean 'messenger of God' in Sanskrit<sup>i</sup>.

## Mynahs and Man:

Starlings and mynahs have adapted well to living alongside humans. They often roost in large numbers on man-made objects, often communications towers and radio aerials, sometimes affecting transmission and reception ability<sup>ii</sup>. Since the time of Pliny, starlings and mynahs of several kinds have been identified as beneficial to man through their consumption of insects, and particularly locusts. Ironically, this insect-eating behaviour led to some mynahs being introduced, as biological control, to crop-bearing countries around the world where they rapidly established themselves as harmful invasive pests.

Starlings and mynahs also help man with flower pollination and seed dispersal. Studies have shown that seeds, which pass through the digestive systems of the birds, are more likely to germinate and sprout earlier.<sup>iii</sup> In particular, the Hill Mynah may be instrumental in the propagation of the Banyan Tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) which is sacred to Hindus and indeed the National Tree of India, which may help explain the birds' religious significance in the Hindu religion. Other Mynah species with religious significance include the Brahminy or Pagoda Mynah (*Sturnus pagodarum*) and the Common Mynah (*Acridotheres tristis*). These species have a tendency to nest in temples. This significance perhaps parallels the old druidic significance of Common Starlings<sup>iv</sup>.

In Gujarat, India, there are dovecotes (or 'cotes') known as *chabutras*. These houses, built on platforms, are primarily for doves and pigeons but are also used by peacocks, sparrows and mynahs. The Gujarats believe that human spirits assume the form of birds and animals after death, so they must be cared for.

Mynahs are regarded as symbols of undying love, because they often pair for life. They are also symbols of peace, similar to the dove in Europe. Nepalese folklore tells us that the mynah and the parakeet were lovers. Thus, romantic couples are often given the name '*Myna Justo Joda*' (mynah-like lovers) in Nepalese literature. A handsome and good looking couple, loving each other dearly, is given the name '*Myna Justo Milne*' (matching like the mynah bird).

### **Culinary:**

Notwithstanding their religious significance, some mynah species are often captured for food. A visit to the bird market in any Indonesian city will reveal many starlings and mynahs available for small sums. A visit to even major hotels in Indonesia will reveal *burung burung* on the menu (birds, including starlings and mynahs).

### **Names:**

*English:* Grackle, Grakle, Maina, Mina, Mino, Minor, Myna, Mynah (Bird), Pastor, Starling

*Hindi:* Mainā (मैना (Hindi and Urdu)), Madana (मदन (Sanskrit))

*Chinese:* 英文名

### **Facts & Figures (for mynahs in general)**

Omnivores. 114 species in the *Sturnidae* family, in nearly 30 genera. About 30 species are called mynah. Order: Passeriformes, Family: Sturnidae.

## The (Greater) Hill Mynah - *Gracula religiosa*

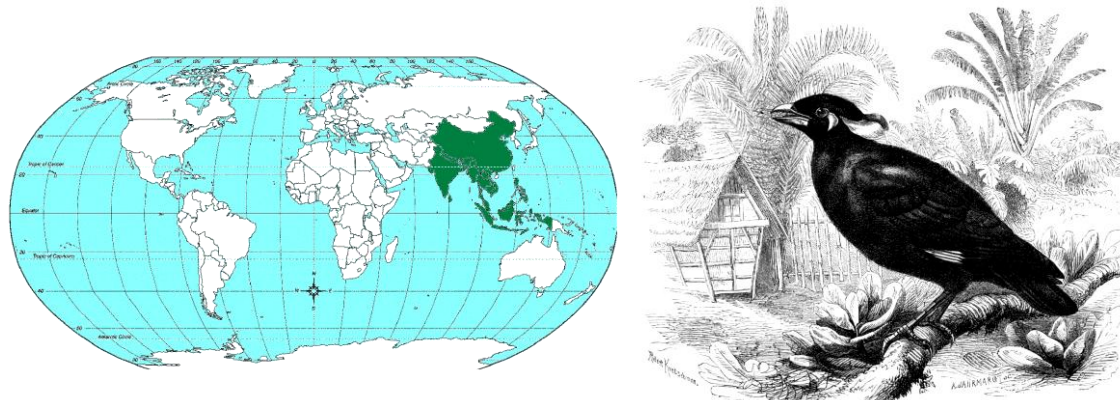


Figure 1 - Hill Mynah distribution (green: native)

Hill Mynahs are the mynahs most associated, in the west, with mimicking human speech. A Hill Mynah is a glossy black bird with a purple/green sheen, about the size of a Mistle Thrush, with a prominent white wing patch, bright yellow feet and legs and a large orange/red bill. The head is adorned with bright yellow wattles looking not unlike a pair of neck headphones. The yellow wattles get longer with age and the exact pattern varies between subspecies. Sexes are alike and young birds are duller. Pairs are monogamous and mate for life.

Unlike their cousins the Common Mynahs, Hill Mynahs spend most of their time in dense tree cover, high in the canopy, in large noisy communities. The birds are omnivorous, eating fruit, nectar and insects. They nest in holes in trees.

The generic *Gracula* derives from the old Latin *graculus* meaning jackdaw, perhaps originally reflecting the call. The specific *religiosa* refers to the historical sacred nature of the birds and their tendency to inhabit temples. The alternative generic name *Eulabes* is from Greek meaning devout and scrupulous in worship.

### Hill Mynahs and Man:

Hill Mynahs are sought, in the west, as pets, because of their endearing mimicking of the human voice. Ironically they are rarely encountered in pet shops as demand hugely outstrips supply. Illegal exploitation by the pet industry has had a huge effect on bird numbers in some regions of India though numbers as a whole are generally thought to be good. In their native countries, particularly India, they are also kept as entertaining house birds. Talking mynahs were great favourites of the Rana rulers of Nepal and were kept as royal pets. In ancient Greece too, mynahs were kept among the aristocracy as pets. Today, the birds also play a considerable role in the pollination and seed dispersal of some useful plants.

In India, mynahs have been considered sacred for more than 2,000 years. During feast days, individual mynahs were carted through the city by oxen. Several Asian religions affirm belief in the metempsychosis or transmigration of souls, after death, into other animal forms, including the Hill Mynah.

A well-known Punjabi legend<sup>v</sup> tells of a man who leaves a *sharak* (Hill Mynah) and a parrot to keep an eye on his wife while he is away. She must obtain consent from the birds before any undertaking of note. When she is wooed by a passing prince, she asks the mynah's counsel. When the mynah forbids a liaison, she kills it on the spot. The parrot, taking note of the mynah's fate, tells the woman to let him out of the cage so that he can keep watch for her. When she does, he flies to her husband and gives

her up<sup>vi</sup>. This story is depicted on many tapestries across India.

### Culinary:

Hill Mynahs were commonly eaten. For the Naga people of north-eastern India, curried mynah was a delicacy.<sup>vii</sup>

### Names:

*English:* (Common) Grackle, Common (Hill) Mynah, (Eastern) Hill-Myna, Hill Grackle, Indian Grackle, Indian Hill Myna, Javan Hill Myna, Meina, Mino Bird, Minor Grakle, Myna, Mynah, Southern Grackle, Talking Myna/Mynah

*Scientific:* *Corvus javanensis*, *Eulabes andamanensis*, *Eulabes indica*, *Eulabes intermedia*, *Eulabes javanensis*, *Eulabes musica*, *Eulabes religiosa*, *Eulabes religiosa*, *Gracula javanensis*, *Gracula minor*, *Gracula musica*, *Mainatus javanensis*, *Pastor musicus*, *Sturnus indicus*, *Turdus mainatus*

*Other:* Mainā (Assamese); Pahāri Myna ('hill/mountain mynah', *Bengali*, *Hindi*, *Marathi*); Dao Myna, Myna Gashim (*Cachari*); 拉丁学名 (*Chinese*); Béo, le wea, lo wea, Tiong/Tiung (*Indonesian*); Bed, Mencho (*Javanese*); Bettada Goravanka (*Kannada*); Burung Tiong Mas, Tiong Emas, Tiong Mas (*Malay*); Kattu Myna (*Malayalam*); Shârak (*Persian*); Giri Myna (*Sanskrit*); Sela lihiniya, Salalihiniya (*Sinhalese* (Sri Lanka)); Teeong (*Sumatran*), Malai Myna (*Tamil*); Konda Gorinka (*Telugu*)

### Facts & Figures:

Omnivores. Distributed right across south-east Asia from north-east India, southern China, Indochina, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. State bird of the Indian states of Chhattisgarh and Meghalaya. Recently *Gracula religiosa* has been split into 3 further species: *Gracula indica*, *Gracula robusta*, *Gracula enganensis*. *G. religiosa* also has 7 identified sub-species. Now a protected species under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 (India). 2008 **Red** List. Order: Passeriformes, Family: Sturnidae.

## The Common Mynah - *Acridotheres tristis*

'So I swagger an' strut an' I cuss an' I swagger; I'm wise to the city's hard way. A bit of a bloke an' a bit of a bragger; I've always got plenty to say.'<sup>viii</sup>

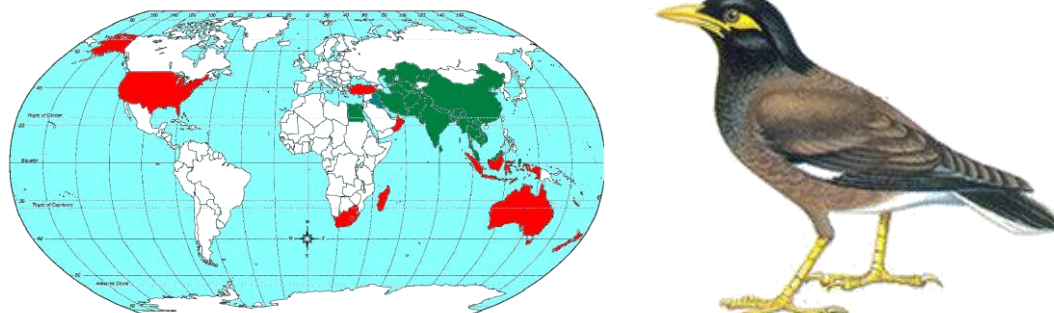


Figure 2 - Common Mynah distribution (green: native, red: introduced, turquoise: vagrant)

Common Mynahs are indeed more common than their well-known talkative cousins the Hill Mynahs. About the size of a European Starling, the birds show a light chocolate-brown body, with a white wing patch, tail edges and vent, glossy black head, yellow bill and feet and characteristic yellow eye-band-mask. Sexes are alike and young birds are paler. They nest in holes in trees. Pairs usually stick close together and are believed to be monogamous and mate for life. They often engage in ritualistic bowing behaviour towards mates and other birds. Common Mynahs have a number of calls and songs. One common call is the scolding '*rādio-rādio-rādio*'<sup>ix</sup>.

Unlike the arboreal Hill Mynahs, Common Mynahs like to hop around on the ground, frequenting open grassland, human habitation and cultivated areas. They are omnivorous, feeding on fruit and human garbage and foraging in short grass for insects and especially grasshoppers.

The generic *Acridotheres* means 'grasshopper hunter'. The specific *tristis* is from the Latin meaning 'sad' or 'dour' and may refer to the birds' colour rather than their plaintiff call.

### Common Mynahs and Man

Common Mynahs are not targeted by the pet trade as often as are their cousins the Hill Mynahs. Nonetheless, unscrupulous traders often disguise Common Mynahs to look like their more famous cousins. The area above the mynah's eyebrows is shaved and painted orange or yellow. The rest of the bird's body is then painted with black grease or shoe polish to increase the resemblance.

The birds are called 'Farmer's Friends' in India, and are welcome there, ridding crops of harmful insects. They are also regarded as important in the dispersal of seed. Many people in the cities of northern India are great bird-fanciers and while they sit with their embroidery or weaving or shoe making, the singing of caged mynahs and other birds keep them company.

From their Asian strongholds these masked bandits have invaded many parts of the world and are regarded as aggressive, invasive and destructive outside their native range. In the nineteenth century, they were identified as birds which could be introduced to crop-bearing countries to control locusts, beetles and other insect pests. Unfortunately this plan backfired and the birds have been too successful in many of their adopted countries, disturbing the native biodiversity and aggressively displacing native birds. Common Mynahs were brought to Melbourne and then other

parts of Australia in 1862, to reduce insect pests in market gardens and sugar-cane plantations. In a 2004 Australian Broadcasting Corporation popular survey, the species was named 'The Most Significant Pest/Problem', beating the Cane Toad and the Cockroach.

Like Hill Mynahs, Common Mynahs have religious significance and there are many Hindi songs about them. They play a part in traditions, legends, folklore and semi-religious customs of India. They are sacred to the Hindu god *Ram Deo* and one sits on his hand<sup>x</sup>. In Kashmir, the goddess *Parvati* (or *Durga*) assumed the form of a *Hor* (mynah). Hindus teach their pet birds the sacred words *Gunga Ram*, *Rama*, and *Sri Bhugwan*, names of gods easy on the Hindu ear and easy for the birds to repeat.

In parts of northern and central India, a folktale is told about the Peacock and the Mynah (or Maina): *The peacock and the maina, had a dancing match. In those days the peacock had very pretty feet. So when he had danced, the maina said, "Lend me your feet and see me dance." They changed feet, but instead of dancing, the deceitful maina ran away and never came back again.* Now it is said 'The peacock dances gaily, till he sees his legs, when he is ashamed and weeps bitterly.' The saying is used as an expression of regret for a foolish bargain<sup>xi</sup>.

### Poetry:

These poems reflect the reaction to mynahs in countries where they are invasive.

#### from: Pacific Island Twelve Days of Christmas<sup>xii</sup>

Number one day of Christmas,  
My Tutu (Aunty) give to me,  
One mynah bird in one papaya tree.

etc...

#### from: The Indian Myna<sup>xiii</sup>

So I swagger an' strut an' I cuss an' I swagger;  
I'm wise to the city's hard way.  
A bit of a bloke an' a bit of a bragger;  
I've always got plenty to say.  
Learned thro' knockin' about since my people came out  
From the land at the back of Bombay.

...

An' I swagger an' scold an' strut an' I swagger,  
An' pick up me fun where I can,  
Or tell off me wife, who's a bit of a nagger,  
Or scrap with the sparrers for scan.  
A bonzer at bluffin', I give you my word,  
For, between you an' me, I'm a pretty tough bird.

**Clarence J. Dennis (1876-1938), written in Australia, 1933.**

### Names:

*English:* Crested Myna, Farmer's Friend, House Myna, (Common) Indian Mynah, Indian Starling, Locust Starling, Maina, Paradise Grackle, Rat in the Sky (Aus. Slang), Talking Mynah

*Scientific:* *Acridotheres griseus*, *Acridotheres tristis*, *Gracula gryllivora*, *Gracula tristis*, *Maina tristoides*, *Paradisea tristis*, *Pastor tristis*, *Pastor tristoides*, *Sternus tristis*, *Sturnus tristis*, *Turdus tristis*

*Other:* Salik sorai, (Ghor) Salika (sorai), Xalika sorai (Assamese); Bhat Shalik

(*Bangladeshi*); (Bhat) Salik (*Bengali*); Dao myna (*Cachari*); Bemni, Saloo (*Chota Nagpur*); Kabar, Kathayi Kabari (*Gujarati*); Desi maina/myna, Gursal, Kaibar, Maina, Nahanavai (*Hindi*); béo, jalak hitam (*Indonesia*); Goravanka, Gorwantera (*Kannada*); Hor (*Kashmiri*); Tserikamena (*Malagasy*); Bemni, Gulgul, Saloo (*Madhya Pradesh*); Tiong Gembala Kerbau (*Malay*); Kavalamkili, Matatta (*Malayalam*); Salonki, Shale (*Marathi*); Bani (*Orissa*); Lalri gutar sharak (Punjabi); Bharat saarika (*Sanskrit*); Gon kawadiya, Mayna, Myna (*Sinhalese* (Sri Lanka)); Myna, Nahanavai, Narthan Kuruvi (*Tamil*); Goranka (*Telugu*); Myna (*Tripuri*)

## Facts & Figures:

Omnivores. Distributed across India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Iran, Burma, S. China, Thailand, Indo China, Malaysia, Afghanistan and Vietnam. Invasive in South Africa, Madagascar, Arabian peninsula, Australia, New Zealand, Solomons, New Caledonia, Fiji, Western Samoa, Cook Islands, Hawaii and other oceanic islands. According to an IUCN report published in 2000, it is now one of the World's 100 Worst Invasive species of any kind. 2008 Red List. Up to 16 species of *Acridotheres* worldwide. Order: Passeriformes, Family: Sturnidae.

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## Notes:

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- <sup>i</sup> In Asia, the Sanskrit language very much plays the role of the Latin language in Europe.
- <sup>ii</sup> Feare et.al.
- <sup>iii</sup> Midya et. al.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Druid* in Irish
- <sup>v</sup> The original may be a Persian legend (Tuti Nama) from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, written in Sanskrit.
- <sup>vi</sup> Clouston
- <sup>vii</sup> Feare et al op cit.
- <sup>viii</sup> Clarence J. Dennis (1876-1938), written in Australia, 1933.
- <sup>ix</sup> Ali
- <sup>x</sup> Kipling
- <sup>xi</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>xii</sup> Common Mynahs are invasive in the Pacific Islands.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Common Mynahs are invasive in Australia.
- <sup>xiv</sup> (1837-1911) Father of Rudyard Kipling.