

Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

GRACEFUL GOULDIANS

The Gouldian Finch *Erythrura gouldiae* is a spectacular colourful bird which was once common in flocks of thousands in grasslands across northern Australia.

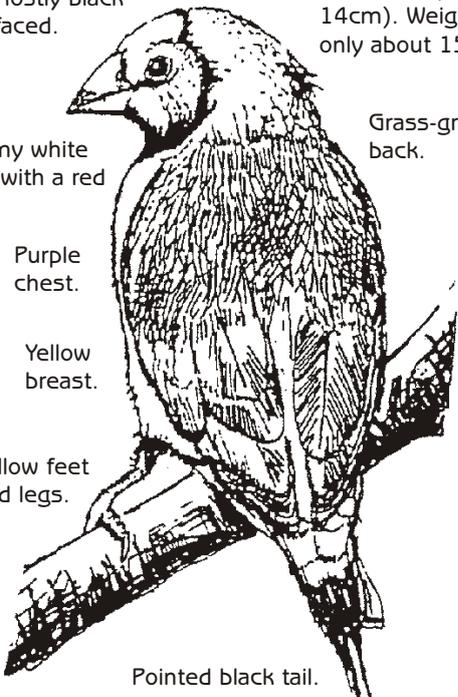
If you see their beauty you are not likely to forget it! They have brilliant purple chests, bright yellow breasts and vibrant grass-green backs and wings. Most have black faces but there are also red faced and sometimes yellow-faced ones. The boys are better looking, because they are much more brightly coloured than the girls, which is often the way with birds.

Mostly black faced.

Small bird (13-14cm). Weighs only about 15g.

Creamy white beak with a red tip.

Grass-green back.



Purple chest.

Yellow breast.

Yellow feet and legs.

Pointed black tail.

GRASS SEED GOBBLEGUTS

Gouldian Finches live and feed on grass seeds, but they are fussy eaters! In the dry and part of the late wet season (Feb.- Oct.) they live in grassy woodlands, often in hilly areas. Here they dine on speargrass (*Sorghum*) seeds. During the wet, as these seeds become scarce, they move homes from the hills to eat other types of grass seeds in the low lands.

Like other seed eating birds, Gouldian Finches have to drink each day. They move down to waterholes at dawn and quickly suck water up as though they were drinking through a straw before disappearing back into the bush.

HIDE AND SEEK

Gouldian Finch numbers have now dwindled. Scientists suggest that there may now be only a few thousand left in the wild, so they have officially been declared an ENDANGERED bird.

They are only found in a few places in the Top End. The largest known breeding population lives in the Yinberrie Hills, just north of Katherine. If you are really lucky you may see them in the wild if you visit Nitmiluk, Limmen or Gregory National Parks.

DID YOU KNOW...

The discoverer of this bird, John Gould, named it after his wife: "It was with feelings of the purest affection that I ventured to dedicate this lovely bird to the memory of my late wife" - John Gould, 1865.



Northern Territory Government



HOLLOW HOMES AMONGST THE GUM TREES



Unlike other finches, the Gouldian Finch lays its eggs in hollow trees. But again it is very choosy. It prefers hollows within smooth-barked species of gum tree such as Snappy gum *Eucalyptus brevifolia* and Salmon gum *E. tintinnans*.

Both parents take care of their babies (nestlings) which have brightly shining green spots either side of their mouth. These are thought to be like 'landing lights' to help the parents 'home in' on the nestlings' gaping mouths in the dark of the hollow.

Early on it was thought that Gouldians were disappearing because they were being trapped for use as pets. However scientists now believe that cattle, horses, feral pigs and fire are the main cause of their decline. These animals eat the same grasses that Gouldians rely on. It is unclear how fire affects the grasses but it seems that avoiding late, hot dry-season fires is best for this bird. These wildfires also destroy nesting hollows.



As if that was not enough, hungry Gouldians can become even sicker if infected by a parasitic mite which affects their breathing. They may not die but they will not be strong enough to breed successfully. Along with the loss of their homes due to land clearing, and the destruction of drinking waterholes by cattle and buffalo, you have one little bird in need of a big helping hand!

DIFFERENT NAMES!

This little beauty is known by other names. Find out by using the grid to decode our finch facts.

	1	2	3	4	5
A	A	B	C	D	E
B	F	G	H	I	J
C	K	L	M	N	O
D	P	Q	R	S	T
E	U	V	W	X	Y

They are sometimes known as the

D3 A1 B4 C4 A2 C5 E3

finch.

The Jawoyn traditional owners of the Katherine area where they live know them as

C4 B2 A1 C2 C3 A1 E5 B3 E3 C5 D3 C2 C5

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HOW TO HELP

Gouldian Finch recovery involves government agencies (like Parks & Wildlife), scientists, birdwatchers, traditional owners and volunteers working together to first find the causes of their decline and then to do something about them.

Ways to help the Gouldian include:

PROTECTING the grassland where the birds feed and the trees where they nest.

DEVELOPING good grazing and fire management practices.

CONTROLLING feral pigs and horses.

With this sort of co-operation, things are looking up!

Want to learn more about finches?

Check out the affordable field guides *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* by either *Simpson & Day* or the one by *Pizzey & Knight*.

