

Are We Losing the Gouldian Finch?

Richard Musgrove

Looking like a five-year-old was let loose with a spray can, the Gouldian Finch sports bright reds, yellows, purples and blues in vibrant patches over face, belly and rump. A small bird, at only 13-14cm in length (10-14g), it is most definitely one of the more distinctively-coloured in Far North Queensland; males the more striking, females a study in pastels.

You'll occasionally find them nesting in eucalypt hollows, often on rocky hills or low escarpments. Mates are for life and nesting happens in the early wet season, when ripe grass seeds are targeted by this granivore (grain-eater) and sometime insect-eater. Beautiful, but rarely seen in its natural state, concern is felt by many for this little bird's long-term survival in our region.

Survival was not an issue until the late 1950's when the population crashed. In fact, birds were once so common that, between the 1930's and the 1960's, vast numbers were captured and exported from the Mareeba area to Asia and other parts of the World. This over-exploitation, combined with a decline in their food supply — cattle grazing having reduced the preferred grass species — and the spread of predators such as the Pied Butcherbird, contributed to the bird's current predicament.

The conservation effort depends on knowing as much as we can about the current population's status. We need your help if we are to protect this iconic bird. Del Richards has patchy data on the region's Gouldian Finches, dating back to 1974; recent records (2013) come from Lakefield National Park, Laura, Georgetown, Innot Hot Springs and along the Nicholson River towards the Northern Territory border. Mt Isa probably supports the most secure populations. Data are hard to come by. Field observations of birds are challenging at the best of times; in this case more so, as Gouldian Finches apparently stay in one location long enough to breed, then move on.

Please contact Del Richards on (07) 4094 1199 if you have seen this elusive finch. He also has bumper stickers available, to raise awareness; collectable from Del, or Richard Musgrove at the Mareeba Northern Gulf Resource Management Group office (07 4092 1088). Del also hosts 'Bird Talk Back' on ABC Far North on once a month on Tuesday mornings, and would welcome your call.