



FROM
THE FIELD...

Australia Revisited: Gouldian Finches in Their Natural Habitat

by Tony Bucci, San Pedro, CA

It was always my desire to see and study Gouldian Finches *Chloebia gouldiae* in their native habitat. I have visited Australia in the past and made attempts to see Gouldians but failed to do so. Last spring, while "surfing" the Internet for Australian bird web sites, I came across a Gouldian Finch site. Michael Fendley, a coordinator of the Threatened Bird Network at the RAOU Head Office in Australia, was looking for volunteers to help count Gouldian Finches in the Northern Territory. My first thought was: Here is my chance!

Immediately I sent Mr. Fendley e-mail indicating that I was interested in volunteering for the survey. The next day I received Mr. Fendley's reply telling me that he had sent my name to Mr. Peter Dostine, Senior Research Wildlife Officer with the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory in charge of the Gouldian Finch project.

Several days later I received a letter from Mr. Dostine informing me of details for the Gouldian count project. He stated, "The main objective of the work is to derive population indices to monitor trends through time and infer responses to management actions to assist the conservation of the Gouldian." 1997 would be the second year for the project of counting Gouldians at waterholes during the dry season in the Northern Territory.

In order for me to participate in the project, I was to be in Darwin or Katherine, Australia, on July 28th. There I would be met by a Northern Territory ranger and taken to the location.



Natural watering hole for Gouldian Finches in the wild.



Artificial watering holes lined with black plastic are readily used by the Gouldian Finch in the wild. These holes are often only about three feet in diameter.

I left Los Angeles on the 7th of July, landed in Sydney, then proceeded to the city of Perth in Western Australia, a region I had never visited before. In Perth I visited with my cousin. I knew it was mid-winter in Australia, but I did not realize that it would be so cold in Perth. I was forced to buy some winter clothes.

Perth and its port at Fremantle were beautiful places to visit. My cousin insisted that I visit with him longer. He drove me to Albany in the southwestern part of Australia, and then headed toward Cape Leeuwin. The century-

old lighthouse at Cape Leeuwin at the southern tip of the state of Western Australia is the guiding light for sailors entering Australia's South Sea from the Indian Ocean. The next day we travelled north along the beautiful southwestern coast and returned to Perth.

It was then time to part with my cousin. I left Perth by bus and travelled north toward Broome. I chose to ride a bus in order to see more of Western Australia. It was a gruelling two-days-and-one-night bus ride to reach Broome. Broome has beautiful beaches and a tropical climate. I was now

Photos by Tony Bucci

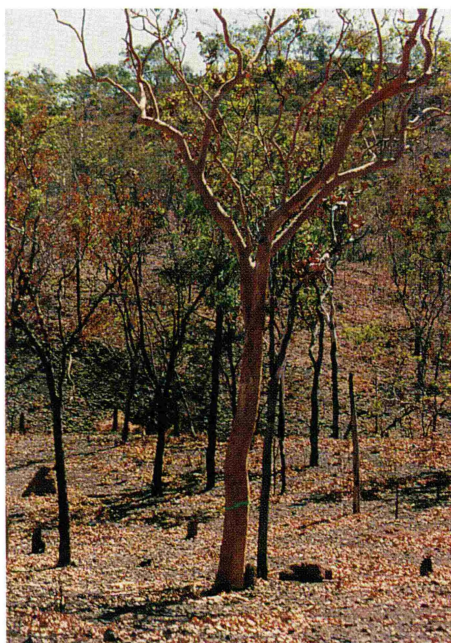
wearing shorts, a tank top, and sandals. This would be my "uniform" for the rest of my stay in Australia. I rested in Broome for two days then proceeded with another night's bus ride to Katherine.

I stayed in Katherine for two days and visited the famous Katherine Gorge. It was now July 28th, and I anxiously waited to be picked up by the Northern Territory ranger. To my surprise, I was picked up right at 2:00 P.M., as planned, by Mr. Peter Dostine, and we drove to Edith Falls where we made our base camp.

I immediately pitched my tent on nice grassy ground. This was to be my home for the next seven days. I met all of the Australian volunteers and a couple from Germany. In total, we were 15 enthusiastic "bird nuts," there to do our job. Mr. Dostine was in charge of the project.

Every morning we got up at 5:00 A.M. A quick breakfast was available on a "help yourself" basis, which was reminiscent of my army days. By 5:30 we were on our way to the Yinberrie Hills.

The Yinberrie Hills are used by Gouldian Finches each year during the dry season to feed and nest. It is the site of the largest known breeding population. Study of the area is there-

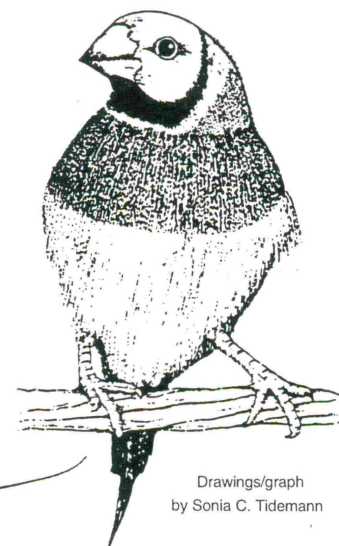
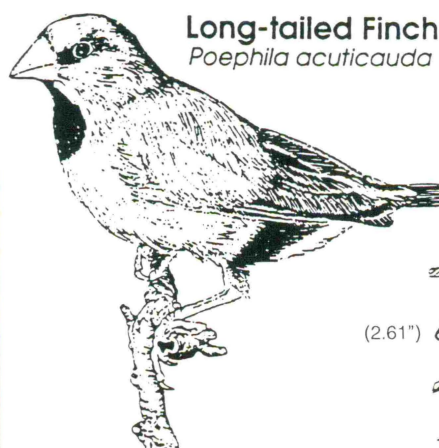
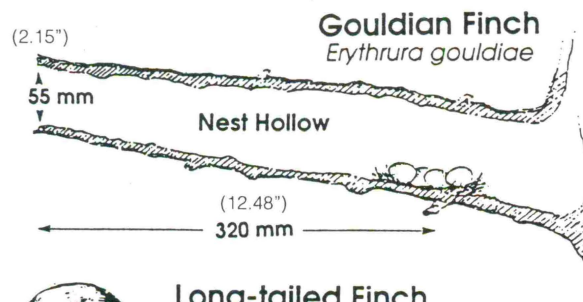


Salmon Gum Tree.

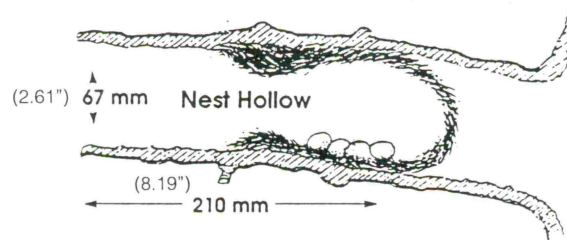


Favorite Gouldian nest in a Salmon Gum Tree.

Photos by Tony Buccci



Drawings/graph
by Sonia C. Tidemann



Characteristics of the hollows selected as breeding sites by Gouldian and Long-tailed Finches.

Characteristics (means) of variables measured at nest sites of Gouldian and Long-tailed Finches and trees chosen randomly.

	Nest sites		
	Gouldian	Long-tailed	Random
Tree Height (m)	9.6	9.7	9.4
Nest Height (m)	3.7 [†]	3.5 [†]	2.9
Number of trunks per tree	1.7 [†]	1.8 [†]	2.3
Diameter of trunk bearing nest (m)	0.3 [†]	0.32 [†]	0.29
Depth of hollow (m)	0.47	0.62	0.52

[†]Significantly different from random.



Field researchers preparing to study the Lady Gould Finch in the wilds of the Northern Territory, Australia.

fore of obvious importance to assess the conservation status of the Gouldian Finch. Results from simultaneous counts conducted in 1996 suggest that this method provides a useful index of population size.

Our group would do the same as was done previously: simultaneous counts of birds' daily watering points conducted at the same time. That was the reason why many volunteers were needed.

We left in groups of three to four volunteers in four-wheel drive Toyota trucks and Land Cruisers. The roads are very rocky and dusty in the Yinberrie Hills. In fact, the truck in which I was riding had two flats before we got there. One at a time we were dropped off at different locations. Each of us had a location assigned each day. Most of the time, after being dropped off, we had to walk to our location through riverbeds to reach a water-hole.

Waterholes in the riverbeds varied in size. Some were about half the size of a backyard swimming pool, while others were much smaller. At the end of July, it was well into the dry season. By season's end in November, these waterholes would be totally dry.

In addition to the riverbed waterholes, there are artificial waterholes in the Yinberrie Hills, maintained by the Mt. Todd Gold Mine workers. The artificial holes are maintained by the mine to help Gouldians survive the dry season. Also, it discourages Gouldians from visiting contaminated waterbodies on the mine site. The artificial waterholes are made with black plastic sheeting placed amongst rocks to form a small pool. The pool formed is approximately 3 feet in diameter, and some rocks are placed in it to create an island for Gouldians and other finches to land and drink. The water supply is kept in a drum placed about 30 feet away. A small hose supplies the water-hole by a gravity drip system. I was told that Gouldian Finches prefer to drink from these small artificial holes.

As I mentioned before, we were left alone at the waterhole. I usually positioned myself about 40 feet away from the waterhole, a good distance from which to observe using binoculars.

We were given data sheets with

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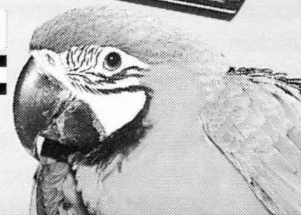
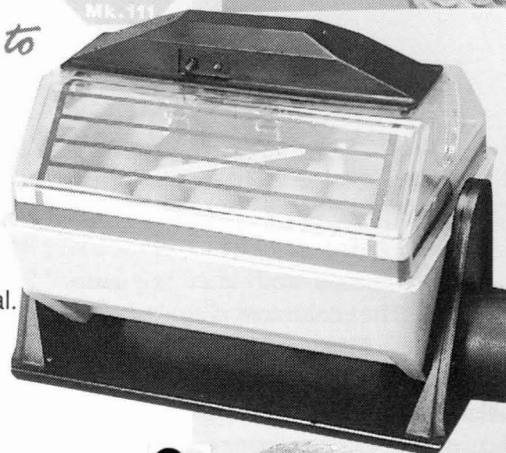
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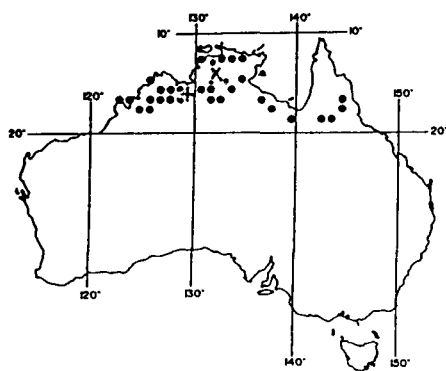
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Historical distribution of Gouldian Finches across northern Australia (after Blakers et al. 1984). Study sites were situated near Katherine (x) and Kununurra (+).

several columns and lines to keep records. The columns were labeled "Gouldian Finch-Adult," "Gouldian Finch-Juvenile," "Long-tailed Finch," "Masked Finch," and the fifth column was used for doves, parrots, and other finches.

The lines were spaced for 15 minute counts. For example: 07:15-07:30; 07:30-07:45; etc. It continued down through the last count, from 11:00 to 11:15 A.M. We were told to count only the ones that drink. I assume it was because once the bird took a good drink, it would not come back the same morning.

My first day was the most exciting. Many birds arrived first thing in the morning, mostly Yellow-tinted Honey Eaters, Long-tailed Finches, and a few Masked Finches. There were no Gouldian Finches in sight. Suddenly, at 8:15 A.M., I saw a Black-headed Gouldian hen drinking. My heart was pounding. For the first time I was seeing a wild Gouldian Finch! I held my breath, hoping not to scare her away. Then I saw four young (uncolored) and a red-headed male. They must have been a family.

I took a deep breath and entered in the proper columns: two adult Gouldian Finches, four juvenile Gouldian Finches, and ten Long-tailed Finches. I continued to count birds until 11:15 A.M. The morning went very fast with a total count of 40 adult Gouldians, 80 juvenile Goulds, 100 Long-tailed Finches, 15 Masked Finches, several doves, four Northern Rosella, two Hooded Parrots, and many Yellow-tinted Honeyeaters. Ninety per cent of the Gouldians I observed were blackheaded.

My first day of counting was at one of the artificial waterholes. For me, it was a very happy and fulfilling day. I was picked up at 11:30 and taken back to the campground where lunch was waiting for us. Many thanks to Sue ("Gilli") who prepared all of our food. Gilli came all the way from southern Australia as a volunteer to cook for us. Also, many thanks to David Hooper (Technical Officer) who made daily trips to Katherine to bring fresh supplies of food and liquids. David had a secret place to keep liquids cold, and if you were nice to him, he would give you some after lunch.

During and after lunch made for great fellowship. Comparing notes with other volunteers offered opportunity to learn. At this time Mr. Dostine gave us the compiled results of our efforts for the day. The rest of the afternoon was our time. I enjoyed hiking the surrounding hills of the Edith Falls campground. Also, I went swimming in the small lake at the base of the Edith Falls.

On the second day, I was assigned to count birds at one of the natural waterholes located in the dry riverbed. I enjoyed the solitude and the beauty of the region. Since it was the dry season, the tall grass on the banks of the dry river was yellow and gold in color. I lay there amongst the tall grass under a small tree. Hidden, with a good view of the waterhole, I waited patiently. Many birds flew over my head but none came down to drink. That day my record showed only two Bar-shouldered Doves. I was told that some waterholes can be incredibly busy and others quiet.

Gouldian Finches make nests in the hollows at the ends of tree branches. These hollows are formed by termites. Certain trees are more favored by termites. In the Yinberrie Hills it is the Salmon Gum Tree, or *Eucalyptus tintinnans*. These trees have very smooth trunks and branches, and are pink in color. To satisfy my curiosity, I broke off the dead end of a branch, exposing a hole with termites inside. The Salmon Gum Trees are approximately 20 to 30 feet high and are sparsely distributed among other trees.

According to author Sonia Tidemann, the terrain selected by

Gouldian Finches for breeding sites is rocky. The requirements of a breeding site are Sorghum grass, water within four km (2 1/2 miles), and the hollow Salmon Gum Trees. The historical distribution of Gouldian Finches is across Northern Australia. Breeding starts in late March after the wet season, and ends (I assume) in August.

The next four days we continued our job of counting Gouldians. Every day I was at a different waterhole. Each location was different with respect to the numbers of Gouldian Finches and other birds counted. According to Mr. Dostine's compiled information of the total count for the year of 1997, the population of the Gouldian Finch has increased from the count taken in 1996.

For me, the six days spent in the Yinberrie Hills were some of the happiest days of my life. I met some of the nicest people. Don Franklin, a Gouldian Finch Project employee, and his girlfriend Christina, insisted that I stay with them in Darwin until I was scheduled to depart the Northern Territory.

Our group left Edith Falls in the afternoon of the 3rd of August and reached Darwin in the evening. During the next three days, I visited Kakadu National Park, which is considered the highlight of the Northern Territory.

On my last two days, I visited with Don and Christina. They showed me around Darwin and graciously made me feel at home. I enjoyed their company, good food, and the tropical warm weather of Darwin.

I left Darwin on August 7th and, because of the time change, arrived the same day in Los Angeles. And I brought with me many wonderful memories.

Reference

- Tidemann, Sonia C. 1993. "Management of a Threatened Species: The Gouldian Finch Example," in C.P. Catterall, P.V. Driscoll, K. Hulsman, D. Muir, and E.A. Taplin, eds. *Birds and their Habitats: Status and Conservation in Queensland*, pp. 123-131. (Queensland Ornithological Society, St. Lucia).

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