

# HELPING FROM ABROAD



**by Marcus Pollard**  
Photography by  
**Mike Fidler & Sarah Pryke**

*Photos by Mike Fidler*

It appears to be a sad fact that many endangered species are simply waiting for the clock to strike midnight to mark their demise, as habitat degradation has simply taken its toll to irreversible levels. Over the past year I have had the privilege of working with a wonderful organization based in Australia called Save the Gouldian Fund. Comprised of extremely passionate and dedicated individuals, this organization is making every effort to help the wild Lady Gouldian Finch avoid a similar fate. I have asked Marcus Pollard, Co-Founder and Communications Officer for the Fund, if he would be willing to share the story of a species on the brink of extinction in its natural habitat, as well as the story of a deeply committed team and their efforts to reverse the demise of arguably one of the most beautiful birds in world, and he has most graciously agreed. As there is still hope for the wild Gouldian finch, I felt sure that my fellow members of the AFA here in the states would be interested in finding out how they can help, and share in the rich satisfaction of making a difference from abroad. – **Bill Van Patten**

**Y**ou may find it surprising that you find an article about the wild Gouldian from outback Australia making its way into your American magazine, especially when that article doesn't paint a very rosy picture of the status of that magnificent finch in its wild environs at present. Hopefully before I leave you, I can give you some confidence in its future; however, a friend from the States who is a member of the AFA, suggested that more people in the States needed to be aware of the plight of this species so as they might also be able to share in its salvation.

The finch in question is the Gouldian Finch, *Erythrura chelobia*, scientifically described by noted naturalist John Gould in 1844, who named this most beautiful finch after his long-suffering wife. Given its vast numbers in captivity throughout the world I am sure there are those among you that would say, "endangered, surely he jests!" Unfortunately I do not, yet it was only as recently as the 1950's that these birds roamed in huge flocks:

"It is an exceptionally fine sight to see this mass of Gouldian, Masked and Longtailed finches literally covering the ground and trees around the waterhole. These three species one finds at every waterhole and always in untold numbers....." (Heumann, 1926)

"Early one morning Fred & Mick Lewitzka were awoken by a loud buzzing noise. Within a few moments thousands of Gouldian Finches moved into and through their camp area, all flying either to water or to a feeding ground. The flow of Gouldians continued for about an hour....." (Hutchins, pers.comm.1954 in Fidler & Evans 2005)

"Less than 2500 Gouldian finches may remain in the wild." (Save The Gouldian Fund website 2005)

Alas, we all wish it were not so, but in reality this is the picture for one of aviculture's most iconic species. On a recent annual Gouldian count in the Kimberley region of outback Australia, the recording of a flock of around 240 birds caused much excitement and jubilation, yet the



**Male Gouldian Finch color morphs, photo by Sarah Pryke.**

sobering thought was that only forty years prior one wouldn't have even noticed such a "small" mini-flock amongst the greater masses!

What factors have contributed to the disappearance of a bird that once abounded in such vast numbers that it had the ability to cover entire waterholes? A bird whose distribution map once shaded the entire top end of Australia now reduced to isolated, scattered, small dots? Not just way back in the time of John Gould, but as near as the 1950s and 60s. this bird was very common. A bird whose propensity to breed in captivity and produce a multitude of youngsters is well documented. A bird whose numbers in captivity in most states of America must almost treble the entire wild world population at present—a situation you can assist us to remedy!

If you perform a web or literature search you'll find 100 different reasons for the decline of the wild Gouldian. From over-trapping for the bird trade, parasitism from air-sac mites, road building for mining activities, and the list goes on. But it would appear that one of the major reasons is an all too familiar one these days of habitat destruction created by the overuse of firing and grazing associated with the cattle industry. As if to further exemplify this trend, we see similar downward spirals for many of the granivorous birds of the Tropical Savannahs worldwide.

A brief glance at the map of Australia will show you that the Top End area is vast, approximately the same area as the whole of the east coast states of America. So, one would imagine that there would be plenty of room for cattle and the granivorous birds, but there is one limiting factor that is critical to all of the fauna during the dry season. That is the availability of water. You do not have to be Einstein to imagine the effect of a herd of cattle when they visit a waterhole or, as many water supplies tend to be, small soaks no larger than a small footprint! As you may gather, the Australian Top End is arid and not verdant like your eastern states.

To illustrate this point, I once visited the Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary in the Kimberley District of northwest Australia and immediately noticed the large number of finches and even rarer Purple-crowned Fairy-wren (*Malurus coronatus*) scattered about in the Pandanus Palms which dotted the banks of a nearby stream. When I asked the resident scientist why the birds were in such numbers here as opposed to many other areas throughout the region he simply smiled and asked me whether I'd ever seen a waterhole/soak that had been visited by cattle. To illustrate, he waved his hand at the thick Pandanus Palms which fringed the water source and were literally ringing with wren calls and replied that these would all be flattened to the ground and trampled to dust after a very few visits if it were open to cattle. He painted a very vivid picture indeed!



No Pandanus equals no wrens! Of great significance in the advances of our understanding of ecology is the fact that no species is now seen to work in isolation. Rather, we are now forced to look at the “big picture” and see how all the organisms in an ecosystem interact. This is why the Gouldian Finch is seen as a marker species for all that is wrong in the Kimberley. Simplistically, save the Gouldian and you also take large strides towards saving the entire ecosystem.

For anyone that is not familiar with the history of Mornington Sanctuary, I must point out that the entire area is fenced, and that the cattle have been removed from within its boundaries, as it was originally purchased as a ranching property. This also means it is possible to glean an insight into how the area must have looked prior to the cattle invasion, with huge areas of tall waving Sorghum grasses and masses of clumps of Spinifex grasses providing a bounty of seed heads for the finches of the area.

Sadly that is now mostly a thing of the past outside sanctuaries such as Mornington. It appears from research being undertaken at Mornington that it is common practise to fire the grass three times a year to provide green feed for the cattle. To further compound these effects some species of Spinifex grass seed only seed every two years and will not seed at all if fired more than once every five years! This creation of green biomass may be fine for the cattle, but it means that grass treated in that manner will not be able to set seed, which is extremely bad news for all the finches, and in particular, even more so for the Gouldian.

Why more so for the Gouldian? The Gouldian Finch is a specialist tree hollow nester, whereas the other common Kimberley finches such as Masks, Longtails, Painteds and Black-rump Double bars will all build nests in alternate sites. In other words they can “go with the flow” far more easily and move to areas where the grass seed is more abundant and build nests in any old available tree or tussock! The Gouldian has to stay within flying distance of its nest hollow. If that is not enough for you, then add in the fact that the Gouldian finch has a far narrower seed preference than most other finches and you have the makings of a disaster if left unchecked.

### **What is being done to arrest this slide?**

Fortunately for the Gouldian finch there is an Englishman by the name of Mike Fidler who was smitten by their beauty in his younger days. For 25 plus years he made the pilgrimage to Australia’s remote Kimberley region to participate in studies of the wild Gouldian and was instrumental in the early days of the establishment of Mornington Wildlife Sanctuary as a refuge for many of the regions avifauna. Not content with merely funding various infrastructure exercises at Mornington, he had a burning desire to see the Gouldian Finch restored to its former range across the Top End of Australia.

To this end we formed the Save The Gouldian Fund (STGF), which is a body, devoted to the support of the research being undertaken on the wild Gouldian. To date this body has donated an Argo all terrain vehicle to Mornington to facilitate the study effort during the wet season in

the Sanctuary, supplied half the salary for a full-time Gouldian Research Assistant to aid with day to day running of the Gouldian program and supplied a four wheel drive vehicle to Dr. Sarah Pryke from the Macquarie University, who is currently establishing another research site in the remote western Australian town of Wyndham. One of the advantages of the Wyndham area is that it is relatively free from the devastating effects of fire and the Gouldians themselves are actually visible from the local Caravan/Trailer Park!

Our future plans include the imminent delivery of a fire-support vehicle to Mornington and the planning of a Gouldian Information and Interpretation Centre at Wyndham. For various reasons, aviculture does not always enjoy a good reputation with the general public. The newly planned Centre will allow the public to become involved in the “task” of saving a species in the wild. This is good publicity for aviculture and definitely good for the Gouldian!

In support of all of the above, many avicultural societies and clubs have donated towards our various endeavours. Many organisations and people have welcomed the opportunity to “put something back” into the restoration process for a species that has given them so much joy in their own journey into aviculture. The donations from all manner of avian communities from throughout the world have been both generous as well as humbling.

As you are reading this article, you may think, “What has this to do with me?” Well, Ok, here goes. In aviculture, the normal, non-mutation Gouldian finch is relatively cheap, freely available, a free breeder, not held in low numbers or in need of specialist breeding to ensure genetic diversity. Yet how would we be judged if we simply left our heads in the sand, did nothing, and allowed the Gouldian to become extinct?

As an aviculturist, I would hope that most of you would share my feelings. Would it not be worse to have to ponder the question of whether aviculture and aviculturists did “enough” to support the Gouldian in its struggle? A brief visit to the STGF website will also show you that much of the valuable information being gained will have a flow on effect for all bird keepers. Of particular interest will be the nutritional research once it has been completed and published—this will be a first for finch aviculture!

To assure all readers that we have not adopted the “Ostrich approach” Down Under, it would seem appropriate to share with you a brief rundown of the captive work being undertaken by the STGF.

### **The Gouldian Research Station**

Just a few hours drive north of Sydney, New South Wales, nestled amid the trees and gullies, sits the township of Cooranbong. It is from this location that much of the current captive research into the Gouldian Finch is taking place.

It was a fateful day when Dr. Sarah Pryke and Mike first met and a day with real significance for Gouldian Research!

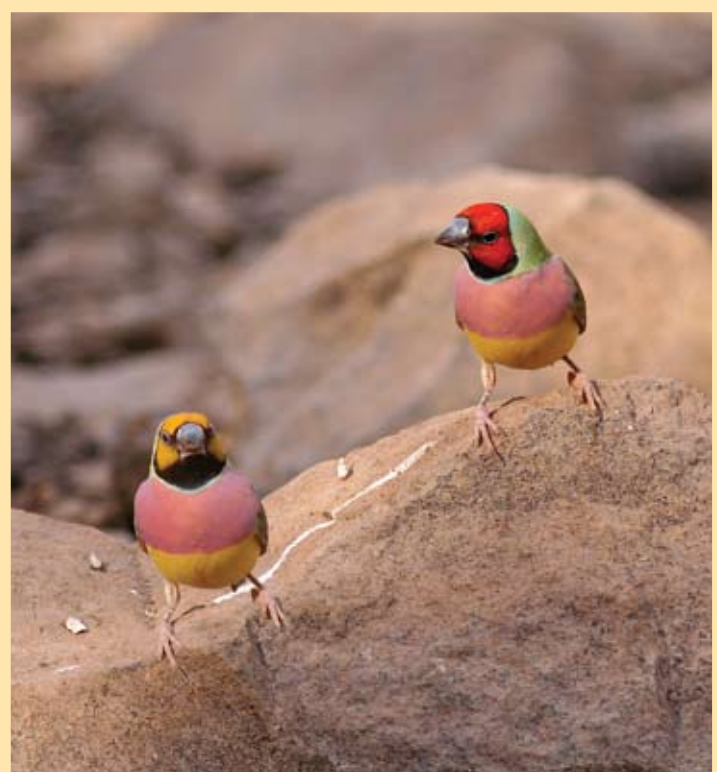
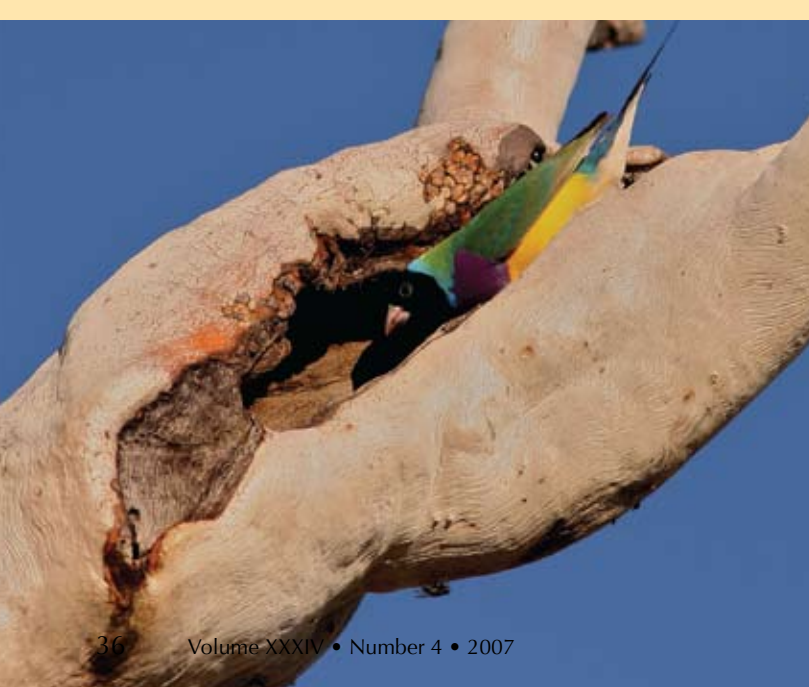
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**Photos from left to right: Male Gouldian inspecting nest site, photo by Sarah Pryke; Gouldian Nest Tree at Mornington Sanctuary, photo by Mike Fidler; Gouldian habitat at Fitzroy Bluff, photo by Mike Fidler; Gouldian drinking at Officers Waterhole, photo by Mike Fidler; Learning to drink, photo by Mike Fidler.**











After enquiring from Sarah what she needed in the way of infrastructure to perform her research, Mike had it constructed! Still more room was required to house the ever increasing Gouldian numbers, so Mike's aviaries were then donated to the "war effort" as well. Currently, there are over 1200 normal wild-type Gouldians housed here, which makes for a statistically significant research population. Dr. Pryke has published many articles based upon her research at the Gouldian Research Station, and rather than blinding you with her findings, far better that I point you to the website where you may read them for yourself: [www.savethegouldian.org/news/papers.htm](http://www.savethegouldian.org/news/papers.htm)

Suffice it to say that there is much in these publications to assist the average Gouldian breeder when setting up their own captive populations.

The dominance hierarchy research is ongoing and birds are under constant scrutiny for their nest and mate selection behaviour. This work has already assisted a few of us when setting up the placement of our breeding boxes for the season. And don't forget that red-heads are feistier than their black and yellow-headed cousins, so keep them at lower densities.

Sarah also objectively measures the colour patches of Gouldians using a reflectance spectrometer (including the strong ultraviolet in their blue and violet patches, which we as humans are all completely blind to!). So, does the brightest bird get the ladies?

Two entire sections of the Research Station are occupied by breeding pairs of Gouldians, which are being studied to ascertain their full breeding behaviour. Each individual bird has a transponder built into its leg ring which is linked to a new high-tech decoder system used to monitor the movements of birds as they go through their daily routine (e.g. during dominance interactions, nest building, incubating, and chick feeding). This allows Sarah to calculate the frequency of visits to the nest when feeding chicks and during incubation, and we are all waiting patiently for the results to be published. I did say that what transpires here is state of the art!

Another very important aspect of work being done at the Research Station is on nutrition, and in particular, how choosy Gouldians are about what they will eat, and how important husking time and nutritional content is in determining their seed choice. Remember that one of the limiting factors put forward for the Gouldians decline in the wild is that it has a very narrow seed preference, far more so than for other granivorous finch species. This research will also hopefully lead to the development of a diet especially designed for finches, which would be a brilliant outcome for all finch keepers!

Sarah has just taken a new PhD student under her wing in James Brazill-Boast, who is working on understanding the breeding dynamics and competition between Gouldian Finches and the ecologically very similar and very successful Long-tail Finches in the wild (who generally live in the same area, eat the same food, and nest in the same nest hollows). James is currently working in the Wyndham (eastern Kimberley)

region of Western Australia observing how competition between these two species affects the breeding success of wild Gouldians.

Just so that you don't get the impression there are all these people walking around the Research Station in white lab coats, we throw the doors open to allow the public to view the research being undertaken. We have had two such Open Days, with a third planned for October 2008. Around 150 lucky souls get to visit the facility and are taken through Mike's large planted habitat aviaries and given a first hand look at how he breeds and feeds his own finches. From there it is on to the research facilities where Dr. Pryke is on hand to lead you through her research and to demonstrate the various techniques employed to obtain her data. While this is happening, other organised groups are listening to various guest speakers or enjoying a break in the picturesque grounds of the facility. The local Hunter Branch of the Finch Society of Australia runs the day and they do a spectacular job whether behind the barbeque serving up your lunch or leading you through sections of the facility.

Perhaps if you are thinking of visiting Australia in 2008, you might like to drop us a line and assure yourself of a place at the next Open Day just to check up on what I have been telling you for yourself! And if time is not a problem you might also like to come and join us on the wild Gouldian census in the Kimberley itself, held in September of each year. Now that would be the adventure of a lifetime!!

To bring us back to reality I thought I'd give the last word to good Captain S.A. White whose travels in outback Australia in the name of science are well known and who penned these prophetic words after just having been confronted by Gouldian Finches, Red-winged Parrots and a host of other avian species in this "Garden of Eden:"

".....primitive people have lived in this wonderful garden for so many hundreds upon hundreds of years, yet here it is in all its natural beauty. Let the white men occupy the country for but a brief time, and they will have wiped out all its loveliness." (C.A. Smith 1922, in Linn, 1989)

Let us hope that we can all go along with the Save The Gouldian Fund in some way or form to ensure that we can redress the balance as far as the Gouldian Finch is concerned.

I would like to thank those people that have made it possible for me to present this article to you, from Mike & Elisabeth Fidler for the opportunity to make a difference, and to Bill for encouraging us to take the plight of the Gouldian to our American counterparts. Without such interest and support for ventures like the Save The Gouldian Fund, I feel our hobby will be all the poorer. Again, I trust you will take the opportunity to visit us online at [www.savethegouldian.org](http://www.savethegouldian.org) (if not in person!) and hope that many of you out there will even take the plunge and join us in our task of assisting with the restoration of the wild Gouldian. Should you wish to ask more, please feel free to contact me by email at:

[marcus\\_pollard@hotmail.com](mailto:marcus_pollard@hotmail.com)

[www.savethegouldian.org](http://www.savethegouldian.org)

**Photos from left to right: Gouldian guarding a nesting hollow, photo by Sarah Pryke; Black Head Gouldian, photo by Mike Fidler; Dr. Sarah Pryke and Marcus Pollard, photo by Mike Fidler; Boab tree, photo by Mike Fidler; Male Gouldian at nesting hollow, photo by Sarah Pryke; Gouldian Finch female color morphs, photo by Sarah Pryke.**





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