



Gouldian Finch Study North Queensland - Update September 2021

2021 nesting done and dusted

This ongoing QCS study did well at locating nest sites earlier this year (refer May 2021 update) and revealed some interesting deviations from what is considered the Gouldian norm elsewhere. Notable amongst these was a more generalist selection of nesting trees, not solely the smooth-barked *Eucalyptus* and *Corymbia* species used in the Top End and NW Queensland. There are several potential hypotheses to help explain this emerging pattern locally, ranging from cluster nesting and scarce reptilian predators to divergent genetic relationships. Some of these hypotheses we plan to test further next year.

Back in May we were also interested to find whether the long 2021 Wet season and associated abundant grass seeds would lead to a longer and more productive breeding season than usual. So, with polished lenses (and newly-syringed ears in my case!) we targeted the nesting clusters in April-July. Interestingly, breeding appeared to cease abruptly as in previous years (although we still have some cameras to check), and brood sizes also look to be little different to those of previous years.



Above – A typical nest hollow in a dead branch. Note chick colours resembling dead wood!

Some recently completed surveys

We managed to survey parts of three “new” properties in the Mitchell and Gilbert catchments, all three of which have had past or recent reports of Gouldians. Only one of the three properties produced a Gouldian sighting, and we got no evidence that they supported breeding numbers.



Adult and juveniles, June 2021.

Bill, Ed, Grahame and I also revisited a known Gouldian site in the Gilbert catchment and, encouragingly, found 50+ birds with minimal effort, indicating not much had changed since our previous visit last year. This included a golden-headed individual which Ed captured on video and subsequently discovered later when running through his videos. (Videos are often more useful than photos at Gouldian concentrations as they capture birds at various lighting angles, reducing the chances of interpretive error).

Awareness raising support from Gulf Savannah NRM



Gulf Savannah NRM have been assisting in developing or revamping some of our awareness material to go with the material that Pippy has been preparing for schools. The organisation is also assisting with other Citizen Science and Landcare initiatives, including a White-bellied Crimson Finch project being run with the Kowanyama rangers and Mitchell River Watershed Management Group.

Data analyses

Recently I've been tidying up some of the data for analysis and scoping a few papers (OK, some of it mainly thinking and talking about it with others including Brittany Hayward-Brown who recently completed her thesis at CDU). Priorities include diet (our birds again deviate from the Top End norm), species associations (ditto), nesting, feral cat vs dingo activity patterns and changes in habitat use with fire etc. This will enable us to slot in any new data we get next year, e.g., more on nesting. If you are interested in helping with this less dynamic side of the study, please feel free to get in touch. There is also some camera trap footage to analyse and thanks to those of you who have assisted already.

Focus on our surveyors – Pippy Cannon

Pippy was born in the central west of NSW on a grazing and farming property. She was educated at boarding school in Sydney and then Sydney University. Her forays into Birding began with her Father. Each year he would take the three children outside every evening to look for the Dollarbirds returning in Spring and migrating north in the autumn. “We loved their silver dollars and welcomed them eagerly. He found and showed us many nesting birds and taught us to respect the avians”.

“Brolgas roamed the plains where our property is, decreasing in numbers with each new generation of the family. Interestingly the numbers of Black Swans and Crested Pigeons have increased. “I well remember when Dad was away for a few days my wayward brother shooting a Wedge-tailed Eagle and pinning it onto the tennis court fence as a trophy. Usual excuse, stealing lambs. In his defence he was only about ten at the time. However, he received a massive hiding for this misdemeanour when Dad returned. We all learnt to shoot and to drive from an early age as well as ride horses”.

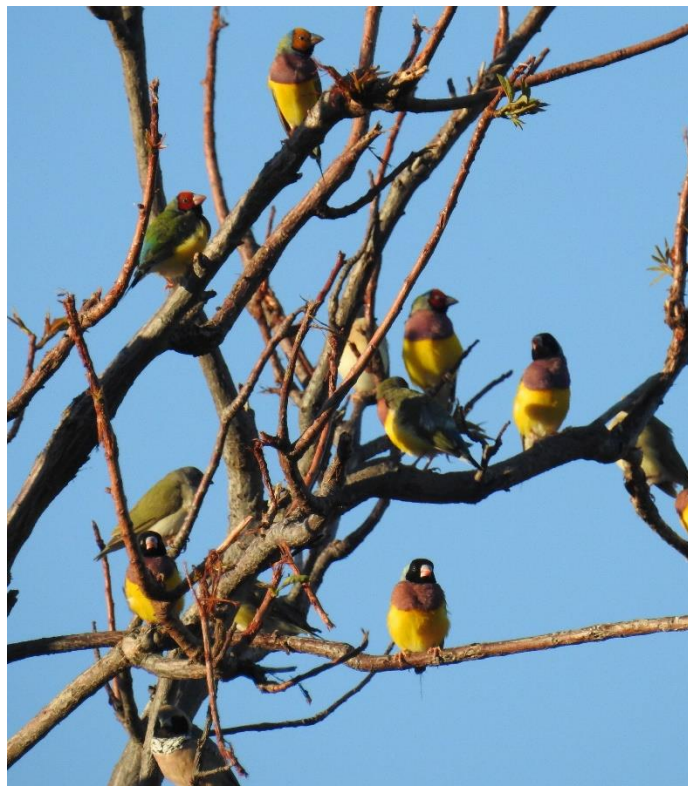
“All Easter holidays were spent in the sheeppyards helping with the footrot etc. On more than one occasion I scraped myself with the Scabby mouth vaccine and ended up with Scabby mouth. Most attractive! My worst memory is of an Aunt being mauled and kicked half to death by a stallion”.

“I found it time to retire from the paid workforce when work began to interfere with my values and goals. With five Grandchildren it was time to do the very best I could for conservation and preservation of our avian friends and help prevent the general loss of biodiversity due to overpopulation and habitat destruction”.

“It has been a great pleasure to work with Ray and co on this Gouldian project and help identify threats and needs for these beautiful birds. Just escaping urbanisation is a delight! Another bonus for me through the project was a great reacquaintance with a school friend after many years. I have also met some very interesting volunteers through this project and loved the company. Best of luck to the beautiful, colourful grass finches, *Erythrura gouldiae*.”



Pippy in atypical finch habitat, Neotropical realm.



Red-, golden- and black-faced Gouldians, courtesy Ed.

Ed Bell and Sanne Boland

Sanne and I both have a love for nature, and we met whilst working at Jersey Zoo, founded by naturalist Gerald Durrell. We have a background in mammal work professionally, as we were both mammal keepers at the zoo and looked after a wide range of species. We also spent the majority of our spring, summer and autumn nights out doing bat research with a local NGO, the Jersey Bat Group. We moved to FNQ in 2019 and have really got into birdwatching since then, finding it a great way to see and appreciate more of this incredible country. I have done some bird surveys in the past as a field assistant for Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in St Lucia, where we were surveying Parrots and dry forest birds. Since then, all we had done was bat work and some mammal trapping so when the opportunity arose to come and help survey for Finches we jumped at the chance. What we lack in experience we hope we make up for in enthusiasm! I've managed to do 3 or 4 trips with the Gouldian team this year, often sadly leaving Sanne at home studying, but we are hoping to both get out again as the wet season approaches. We feel we are just getting to grips with the calls but need a few consistent trips out to really get a handle on the grass ID. It's gratifying to know that the videos are proving so useful.

We've had an amazing time working with Ray and getting to meet the other volunteers and have seen some spectacular country. I would fully recommend participating if you get the chance as this is a project with real data being collected and it's a great way to contribute to conservation in our own back yard.



Ed & Sanne after 3 weeks on the Cape for another project in 2019

Your personal surveys

If you spend time out in the Einasleigh Uplands Bioregion or beyond keep an eye and ear out for Black-faced or Little Woodswallows. It's worth spending a few minutes checking them out for Gouldians and other finches – usually one knows in a few seconds if there are Gouldians present as they are vocal in response to the woodswallow alarm calls. These presence and absence data will be most helpful, and I can provide data sheets if needed. It's also worth checking with landowners about logging data on bird data, ebird etc.



Black-faced Woodswallows.

Upcoming targeted surveys

We are well familiar with the birds' behaviour at this time of year, typically congregating in mixed species flocks and feeding mainly on Firegrass (*Schizachyrium*), *Aristida*, etc. (thanks to Pam's help with ID). On top of this it can also be hit and miss in finding the large flocks, especially after 0930 and above 35C!

However, we still do have some questions to answer late in the Dry season, especially following the storm rains, and then into next year as follows:

December c.17th and c.31st – 3-4 days trips focusing on what the Gouldians and others are eating after the first storms – we especially need people with zoom and video capacity on their cameras so we can better identify the grass, sedge, insects, etc foods that the birds are taking. We might need to bring some of this forward if there is an early Wet...

February 2022 – wet season foods – opportunistic surveys again using videos so we can confirm annual grass seeds being eaten (we've noticed some variation between years).

March-June 2022 – nesting – finding another 15+ nest sites will complete that side of the story. This involves listening and homing in on chick begging calls along transect lines and also staking out some potential nests.

June-July 2022 – wider surveys - looking at distribution on properties that fit the criteria for land-use, fire, woodies, etc. These are mainly drive-through surveys targeting Woodswallows with which the Gouldians are closely associated, and before both species' groups converge in fewer, larger flocks later in the year.

After June 2022 – genetics – all going well we are hoping to complete some hands-on work with geneticists to help with understanding affinities of the local birds.

If you are keen to join any of these surveys, please get in touch with Ray who will provide more detailed information. We can usually determine dates a week or so out from planned surveys, but if you are flexible in availability that's ideal as river levels have a habit of forcing date changes. See further background information on the FQ website finchesqueensland.org.au and the NQ Natural History Group website www.nqnhg.org

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