



Gouldian Finch Study North Queensland - Update No. 7, June 2022

Wet Season Findings

We focused on early Wet Season foods to get more data on Gouldian foods after the first storm rains. This is an interesting time of year when birds had previously been found to be under some dietary stress at this time in the Top End, plus “our” birds lack opportunities for eating Spinifex seeds at this time of year. Previously we had found that sedges were important in the early Wet diet of NE Queensland birds, which is still the case, but this year we had the completely unexpected addition of woody shrub seeds to the diet, apparently not previously recorded for Gouldians. Emu Berry (*Grewia retusifolia*) was being taken in post-burn areas, where a smorgasbord of lightly roasted seeds was collecting in run-off sites along the lower slopes of hills. It wasn't until after the Wet that we determined what these large seeds were that we had videoed in beaks of finches and collected from the feeding stations – the match was not completed until after the Wet when *Grewia* had regenerated and seeded at the same sites.



Above – a few weeks after the first storm-burn with 50+ Gouldians feeding in this pic – not exactly easy to spot!



Above left – There they are! Ceinwen and Dave finding “the flock” mid-December. Right – *Grewia retusifolia*.

2022 Nesting

Many more people have been generously helping in the search for nests this year which is helping us gain a better understanding of nest site selection, especially use of different tree species. Last year we found that a wide range of tree species was used, and not simply smooth-barked *Eucalyptus* and *Corymbia* species that are selected elsewhere (Refer Update 6). We are currently adding to this nest sample and gaining a better understanding of potential nest predators in the area as well.

The late and prolonged Wet this year was conducive to heavy seeding of most species of grass that Gouldians etc. consume, which also raises questions of how long breeding will go on for this year. In addition, the Black-throated Finches have curiously been favouring tree-holes for nesting this year, rather than their usual *Petalostigma* shrub nests, so some potential competition with Gouldians.



Above – a male Gouldian prospecting for nests (left) and some potential predators of finches (right) – Australian Hobby and Stimson’s Python lurking in a Gouldian “colony” are two of the surprisingly few predators present in the study area.



Above left – male Gouldian bringing nest material to nest; and (right) Black-throated Finch at nest site.

Engaging Sciences Grant

The NQNHG Gouldian project is expanding a little this year to reach out to indigenous rangers and school children under a Queensland Government's Engaging Science Grant (ESG). Pippy Cannon and Dr Pamela Schultz are leading the school programme throughout the Einasleigh Uplands Bioregion (EIU) with the support of Gulf Savannah NRM, Queensland Parks, and BirdLife Australia, these groups helping with logistical matters and the development of materials like posters, maps and games. Meanwhile I am working with indigenous rangers, aiming to encourage improved understanding of survey methods, recognition of bird species in the woodswallow-finch assemblage, and identifying the common finch grasses, etc. This has the added benefit of allowing us to access some additional properties for finch surveys.



Above left - Tagalaka rangers Brighton Douglas (left) and James Beasley with a Black-throated Finch nest site in a dead tree. Above right – recognising the appearance and calls of Black-faced Woodswallows helps in the location of most finches.

Focus on our surveyors – Mal Macdonald

Mal was born in Melbourne to health professional parents who worked hard in their careers in order to fund lots of quality time away with the kids, usually involving the great outdoors. Early years were spent in Bendigo which provided an ideal springboard for exploring places like the Whipstick, the Grampians and all along the Murray River. “Be it tenting, caravanning, houseboats, bushwalking, or just day trips away, we had a crack at it and always seemed to spot fantastic plants and animals along the way. It’s only in later life that I realised my mum & dad prioritised that time together over material *stuff*.” Birds were an early interest, with easy to keep species like Zebra Finch, King Quail and Galah always about the house, along with Blue-tongue & Stumpy-tailed Lizards.

“After several trips to the far north over the years, in 1980, my folks finally got the chance to semi-retire to Cairns, where I attended Edge Hill Primary and then Trinity Bay State High. I was blown away by the diversity of birdlife around Cairns and when Dad bought me the original two volume Slater’s Field Guide, I was off. Why would anybody want a caged bird as a pet with that plethora of wild birds all around them? I was lucky to meet my life long best mate, a butterfly nut, at high school and the two of us have been out looking for critters all around Australia and the world ever since.”

“I would describe myself as an annoyingly positive person, but even I have to admit that seeing all the negative environmental news we seem to be bombarded with has had me down at times over the last few years. The best remedy is to do something about it. I’ve not joined nearly as many Gouldian surveys with Ray & the team as I’d like, but when I get out there it’s a good feeling. The first sighting of a wild Gouldian almost made me cry with happiness because I never thought I’d see one locally. It never gets old either. Apart from the surveys of the known “rediscovered” finches, I feel like getting out in the field and searching for them in potentially “new” habitat is also well worthwhile. I look forward to the day when we might be able to say Gouldian Finches are doing okay in a range of locations and would like to think we can get landholders and the wider public to help in that goal.”



Mal on survey in Gouldian country.

The value of personal surveys

As Mal mentioned above, if you spend time out there (in the Einasleigh Uplands Bioregion or beyond) do 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 in the wider distribution questions, and I can provide data sheets if needed. It's also worth checking it's OK with landowners to log sightings on bird data, e-bird etc. I keep hearing from others (including recently from David Mead and Grahame Finnigan) how targeting woodies can produce all sorts of delights, including *P. cincta cincta*.

Upcoming targeted surveys

Some dates for upcoming formal surveys are:

July 1-4 – Nesting surveys Chillagoe area

July 15-18 - Surveys north of the Mitchell River aimed at measuring changes, if any, since 2020

Late July-August –looking at wider distribution around Lynd River, Gilbert River, etc., on properties that fit the survey criteria and potentially integrating with ranger training surveys, dates yet to be determined

Late 2022 – field support to genetics project.

If you are keen to join any of the July-August surveys, please get in touch with Ray who will provide more detailed information including later dates as they become known. See further background information including finch calls on the videos of the FQ website finchesqueensland.org.au and the NQ Natural History Group website www.nqnhg.org

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