



Gouldian Finch Study North Queensland - Update May 2021

Funding renewed

Queensland Citizen Science has recently funded the Gouldian project for a further year and the project will continue to be administered by NQ Nats. The funding means that we can continue reimbursing mileage costs for participants and cover a few other direct expenses as well. Thanks very much to those of you who have donated your vehicle allocation to the project – you shouldn't feel any need to do this however, given the wear and tear on vehicles that comes with these surveys, and the funds are available to us!

Recently completed surveys

The continuation of the Wet well into April has cramped our style somewhat and we needed to adjust timing and locations for a couple of the Gouldian Finch surveys. Just a shame some of you missed out on your preferred survey timetables but see p.3 for projected dates ahead. If anything, this “real Wet” has made us appreciate how fortunate we were in the previous two wet seasons having been able to access most hot spots. Outcomes have still been good so far this season of abundant grass seeding, with concentrations of breeding Gouldians being found in a couple of areas and we are steadily building up a sample of nest sites and family parties. We are also gaining a better knowledge of feeding associations and foods in relation to past fire events.



Above – Adult males outside nest sites (Left) and returning to feed chicks (R, P. De Geest)

Nests

So far this season we have confirmed 7 active nest sites and hope to get this to over 10. We have been finding these nests by listening for the chicks' loud begging calls when the adults return to the nest to feed them and we sometimes see adults hanging around nest sites too. So, we undertake listening and scanning during walking transects (OK, lots of luck involved!), and by following up around sites where we had previously seen adults hole inspecting (see photos above). The nests have been in a range of smooth-barked *Eucalyptus* and *Corymbia* species and in some more surprising sites too. We are hoping that nesting will continue for a while yet so we can add to this knowledge – the abundance of seeds of firegrass etc this year may well encourage a longer breeding season and multiple broods.



Above – Adult female returning to nest site (L) and a recently fledged young Gouldian (R)

Focus on our surveyors – Patrick De Geest

Patrick needs no introduction to naturalists in far North Queensland. Having emigrated from Belgium in 2010, he now lives in Atherton with his family. From the beautiful Atherton Tableland, he operates his birding & wildlife tours (Eyes on Wildlife) which specialises in the harder-to-find mammals and birds, but just as well caters for the budding wildlife enthusiasts. Patrick now combines the guiding with a bit of teaching as the latter is a passion of his as well and it makes up for the current absence of international guests. Birds and nature in general have been an important part of Patrick's life since he was a young child. His birding started at the age of 9 when his father started taking him out on weekly walks through the fields, finding frogs, nesting Little Owls, Lapwings, cuckoos, etc... When he came to Australia, he wanted to see Gouldian Finches and he saw his first Gouldian Finch in the NT in 2011. Then he focused on finding GF in QLD and got in touch with Ray Pierce as Ray was doing surveys for finches and other birds for the Northern Gulf Resource Management Group. On his first outing with Ray in late 2017, he saw his first Gouldian Finch in QLD. Not much later and on what was going to be the last morning of a general bird survey on 14 February 2018, Patrick and Ray literally bumped into 100 or so Gouldian Finches at sunrise. Not only was it an unforgettable and unique experience, but it was also a significant moment for this species in QLD and prompted the more intensive and ongoing study which is happening now.



Upcoming surveys

For May-June we will continue the recent focus on finding nests and determining productivity as indexed via family size. These surveys involve combinations of walking transects and sitting back and watching specific tree holes that might be being used for nesting. If you have time to join any of these surveys, please get in touch with Ray who will provide more detailed information. Upcoming dates are:

21-25 May leaving Mareeba 1100 h.

Possibly same time on 28-30 May, depending on access and interest.

4-8 June leaving Mareeba 1100 h.

18-22 June leaving Mareeba 1100 this one extended to include drive-through surveys of multiple properties targeting woodswallows to help determine wider distribution of Gouldians in the region.

See background information on the FQ website finchesqueensland.org.au and the NQ Nats website www.nqnhg.org

Other snippets

We have been finding a few nests of Masked Finches lately, typically on or near the ground, but one being built 7 m up a eucalypt last month was quite a surprise (below left). Little Woodswallows are a frequent member of finch associations (bottom left) as are foraging Red-backed Kingfishers (below right).



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