7 September 2008

National Threatened Species Day

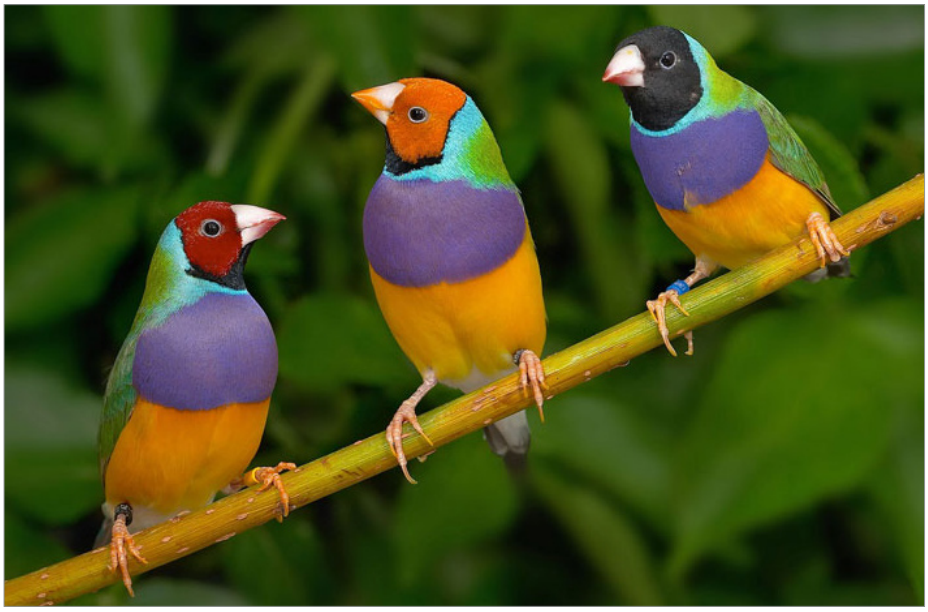
Australian Government

Threatened Species Network

WWF

Gouldian finch

Erythrura gouldiae



CONSERVATION STATUS

Australian Government:

Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999

Western Australia:

Wildlife Conservation Act 1950

Northern Territory:

Territory Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 2000

Queensland:

Nature Conservation Act 1992

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Introduction

The Gouldian finch is a medium-sized grass eating bird that lives only in the northern savannas region of Australia. It is a strikingly colourful bird which was once very common. Although Gouldian finches are popular as pets around the world, less than 2500 adult finches remain in the wild. These remaining finches are broken up into isolated flocks, most with less than 100 birds each.

Did you know?

John Gould, discoverer of the Gouldian finch, was so impressed by the bird's gorgeous plumage that he named it the Lady Gouldian finch after his late wife. This has since been shortened to the Gouldian finch.

What do they look like?

The Gouldian finch is easily recognised by its purple chest, yellow breast and green back. Their legs and feet are yellow and they have a long, pointed tail. Females are duller than males, and the juveniles are completely dull green. There are three different colour-morphs of Gouldian finches, which have either black, red, or yellow faces.

Where do they live?

In the past, the Gouldian finch was widely distributed throughout the tropical savannas of northern Australia. Now it is confined to isolated areas, mostly within the top end of the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region of Western Australia. Few are thought to remain in northern Queensland.

Gouldian finches live in savanna woodlands where they nest in the hollows of smooth-barked eucalypts. The largest known breeding population lives north of Katherine in the Northern Territory. This population utilises different habitat types at different times of the year. For much of the dry season birds remain in their breeding habitat in hilly woodland and use a variety of woodland types in nearby lowland country during the wet season.

Fire plays a big part in determining the local distribution of the Gouldian finch. In the dry season Gouldians rely upon fire to burn the undergrowth so they can find seeds on the ground.

In the wet season they like to feed in places which were not burned in the preceding dry season, as these places will have plenty of seeds for food.

Gouldian finch life history and ecology

Late in the wet season Gouldian finches seek out hollows for nesting, preferring those formed by termites in northern white gum and salmon gum to raise their four or more chicks. Both parents raise the chicks and up to three clutches of eggs can be laid in a season.

Flock size varies with seasons. During the dry season larger feeding flocks can be observed, whereas flocks are smaller and more dispersed during the wet season. Gouldian finches eat only grass seed. During the dry season they feed mainly on the seed of sorghum grass, and during the wet season they eat several species of perennial grasses.

Threats to the Gouldian finch

While the reduction in numbers of Gouldian finches was once thought to be due to capture for sale as pets, this is not the case. The greatest threats to Gouldian finches and other grass-eating birds are changes to habitat resulting from altered fire patterns and grazing pressure.

Research has shown that both fire and grazing can reduce the amount of wet season grass seed available to Gouldians. Frequent fires reduce the amount of seed produced by cockatoo grass and curly spinifex. Cockatoo grass and ribbon grass are also eaten by cattle, horses and pigs, and grazing by these animals can affect the amount of seed produced.

It is thought that a critical period for Gouldians is the onset of the wet season when spear grass seed germinates and is unavailable to birds, and the first of the wet season grasses are yet to produce seed.

The length of this 'resource bottleneck' period varies depending on the pattern of rainfall in the wet season and the dry season fire regime.

Case Study – Managing threatened north Kimberley species

The North Kimberley Biodiversity Hotspot is home to a number of significantly threatened species such as the Gouldian finch, northern quoll, golden bandicoot and red goshawk.

In 2006 a North Kimberley Threatened Species Survey was carried out by Traditional Owners from Uunguu, Balanggarra and Wilinggin native title groups along with researchers from the Department of Environment and Conservation (WA) and the Western Australian Museum. The decline of many species is of concern to the traditional owners that live in the region and the collaboration allowed them to work with researchers to share their knowledge and skills in the management of the threatened species.

The survey found small to medium mammals to be scarce but reptiles abundant in the area. There were several exciting discoveries made during the survey, including two species never before recorded, and a breeding population of Gouldian finches were observed drinking and feeding along the creek system. It is hoped collaborative surveys like this can occur in the future to continue to monitor and collect information about the species of this special region.

What you can do

- Volunteer to become involved in waterhole monitoring of Gouldian finches.
- Protect the habitat of all our native species, including the Gouldian finch.
- Support local efforts to conserve threatened species in your area by joining a local conservation group.
- Land managers can work with scientists to develop fire regimes that are good for grazing and as well as Gouldian finches.
- Help the Gouldian finch by reporting any activities that you see that are likely to harm them or their habitat to the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts – Compliance and Enforcement Branch. Visit www.environment.gov.au/epbc/compliance/inder.html or freecall 1800 110 395 for more information.

Contacts

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References

O'Malley, C. (2006). National Recovery Plan for the Gouldian Finch (*Erythrura gouldiae*). WWF Australia, Sydney and Parks and Wildlife NT, Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts, NT Government, Palmerston.