



ENDANGERED!



THE GOULDIAN FINCH

The spectacularly coloured Gouldian finch (*Erythrura gouldiae*) is one of the most endangered birds in Western Australia.

It was once common across Australia from northern Queensland to the Kimberley, but the past few decades have seen it decline in range and numbers to the point where it is now unusual to see flocks of tens - even in places where it was once possible to see thousands of birds. Its distribution is patchy, and in the Northern Territory only two main breeding sites are known. Some breeding still occurs in the Kimberley and in Queensland, but it is not known to what extent.

The Gouldian finch lives in colonies

in tropical woodlands, and is never far from water. It nests exclusively in hollows in large trees and feeds on the seeds of native grasses, mostly species of *Sorghum*.

Although the species has benefited from the establishment of cattle troughs through much of its range, it has declined due to parasitic mites. Altered fire regimes following pastoral development could also be a cause. Large numbers of finches were trapped for aviculture in the past, but this does not seem to have been a major factor in the bird's decline. Trapping is now illegal.

Most wild Gouldian finches examined by researchers have been infected with an air-sac mite that can

be passed from parent to offspring. This mite, which has not been found in wild populations of other finch species, may be responsible for the bird's high juvenile mortality.

The role of fire in the life history of the Gouldian finch is still poorly understood. Timing of fire appears to affect the availability and ease of access to seeds. This and other aspects of the Gouldian finch's biology are being studied by Dr Sonia Tidemann of the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, with assistance from the World Wide Fund for Nature (Australia).

Photo - Bert Wells

ALLAN BURBIDGE



Visitors from around Australia are discovering what those who live nearby already know - D'Entrecasteaux...C'est Magnifique. Turn to page 10.



Seabirds nest on Pelsaert Island in the Houtman Abrolhos by the million. See page 17.

LANDSCOPE

VOLUME SIX NO. 3 - AUTUMN EDITION 1991



There's more to invertebrates than slugs, maggots and spiders. Turn to page 28 to find out just why invertebrates are so important.



What has happened to Fitzgerald River National Park since the 1989 wildfire? See page 34.



Explore the Dampier Archipelago, a group of rocky islands with a violent past and a wealth of wildlife. Turn to page 48.

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C O V E R

Invertebrates play an important role in the ecosystem of WA's jarrah forest. Earthworms, termites and ants fragment leaf litter and mix organic matter. Some soil and litter invertebrates stimulate plant growth. Soil insects such as larval beetles feed on roots, stimulating the plants' growth rate. Our cover illustration is Philippa Nikulinsky's impression of this process at work in the jarrah forest.



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 Colour Separation by Prepress Services
 Printed in Western Australia by Lamb Printers

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Published by Dr S Shea, Executive Director
 Department of Conservation and Land Management,
 50 Hayman Road, Como, Western Australia 6152.