

Gouldian years

The catfish has been seen recently at meetings concerning the introduction of the personal injuries legislation conspicuously losing his temper with faceless treasury statisticians and has been told to have a break and tilt at another windmill.

Mind you, the catfish is never one to let a chance go by, and malevolently hopes that the much needed "soul-ectomies" for bean counters advocating this change fail in such a way so that they care for every sparrow that falls, the measure of damages they relentlessly pursue (because they have a "really genuine" claim is a scintilla shy of the required threshold - \$14,999.00) and the catfish is placed in a position where he might apologise in crocodile tears for the 'adverse result', as the legislation will soon permit.

But to the task at hand. There is a real Ian Morris who either is or was employed by or connected with the Conservation Commission or is or was a freelance nature photographer. You can see his magnificent photographs in various versions of Kakadu glossies.

Occasionally the catfish has been able to moonlight as a real person when the misguided ring him for advice about ornithology, believing him to be the real Ian Morris.

There was one occasion of a woman who rang from Tasmania wanting to know what to do with the carcass of an albatross she found on a southerly beach (put it in a freezer) and another occasion when a group of Septics wanted a guide around Kakadu for some quality birdwatching (contact the real one - but I would have carried the bags!).

The catfish has always been convinced who has the better job of the two of us, and has always wanted to emulate his nirvana. This article is somewhere along that path.

Anyway, this dream tied into the directive from the secretariat to write something apolitical, reasonably safe and something that I was really interested in. (The catfish is really concerned about the law and lawyers, but I have other interests).

Darwin and surrounds is a great place for ornithology.

There are the ospreys that nest in the high electricity tower along Dick Ward Drive, the Brahminy Kites (the sigil of James Muirhead Chambers) that rove around the edges of the city, into the basins of Cullen Bay and Frances Bay and over the peninsula of Darwin.

Dudley Point gives us a family of curlews, and East Point a range of birds in the rainforests and the mangroves.

For the last five or so years the Orange Footed Scrub Fowl has adopted the gardens around Darwin, although I am not so sure that those who have been woken at night by their raucous calls have adopted them (if you listen closely enough, and apply a little imagination, the call does resemble a rooster's crow).

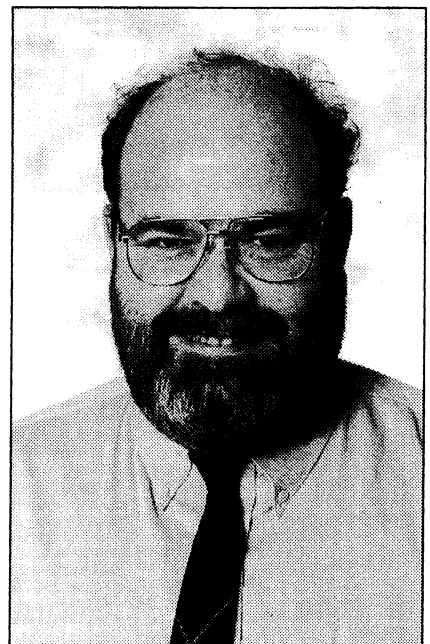
I have a particularly good relationship with a pair who spread the mown grass clippings I leave in a pile in the front garden bed.

The city has the little doves and pigeons, the B1 looking Torres Straits Dove thumping through the gaps in the buildings and the occasional Kestrel floating around.

The Wet is heralded by the 'rainbird', the Koel, the male a big shiny black bird with a long tail and a trumpeting and sometimes mad call, and the pretty speckled but less often seen female.

Then there is the range of spectacular kingfishers: the little Forrest Kingfisher that inhabits the Gardens golf course diving from the rain trees, the Sacred Kingfisher seen around the gardens in Fannie Bay, the occasional Red Tailed Kingfisher (last seen by the catfish at the Darwin Cup: I don't think it was winning).

I have a vivid memory of Markus Spazzapan carrying an Azure Kingfisher that collided head on with



Ian Morris, president

the Supreme Court: the bird was so tiny (it would fit into his hand apart from the overlarge beak) he was convinced it was a fledgling out of the nest but it was a fully grown adult.

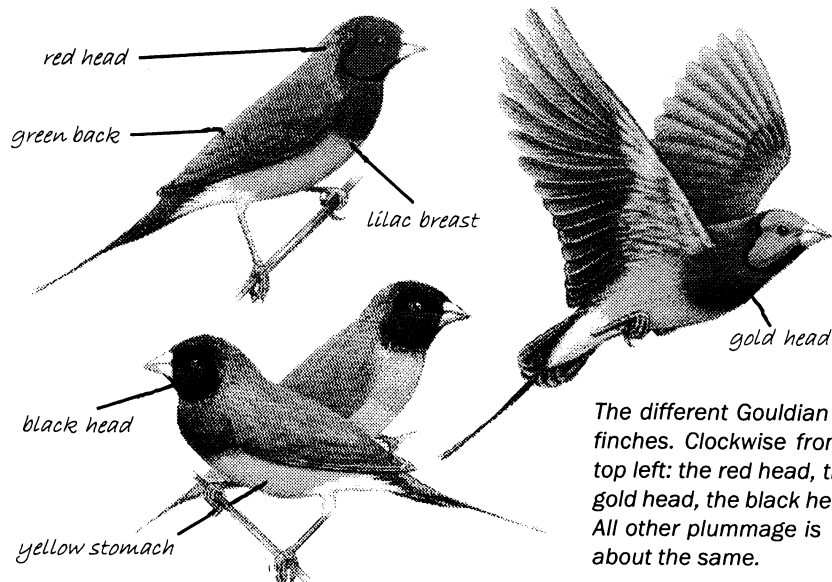
Some birds, of course, haven't adapted that well to suburbia: there used to be a pair of those spectacularly cumbersome fliers, the Pheasant Coucal, in the long grass that used to surround the path across the high school side of Bullocky Point, but the long grass is there no more, and I don't think the ones that used to try and cross Gardens Road near the golf course could run their luck for very long.

There are too many fantastic birds in the Darwin area to speak of in an article such as this (no grateful sighs, please).

Down the track, it only gets better, and it is in respect of one of those birds the balance of the article is about.

When on one of the fruitless expeditions I am told not to talk about I was speaking to the Chief Minister, eventually and more successfully, about Gouldian Finches (*Erthrura gouldiae*) and the railway.

The House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), a bird that thankfully has
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not been able to conquer the desert and set up here, is known as an 'Old World Finch', and the Gouldian and many others native in Australia, are 'New World Finches'.

There is a line that slips through Bali that delineates the new and the old world as far as birds are concerned.

The Old World birds are, in the case of finches, a bit more robust than our locals, but nowhere near as pretty. However the Old World birds are masters at improvisation and can live in our cities, and can turn their hand to any of a number of food sources.

Our local birds are not that successful in dealing with change, and their numbers decline dramatically when their habitat is removed by farming, burning or building.

One such bird is our hero, the Gouldian Finch.

Named after John Gould, the famous cataloguer of Australian birds, the

Gouldian is a very different bird indeed. Unlike other species that sometimes have different plumage caused by very different locations (our Fig Bird is a good example: down south it loses the bright yellow breast and is a much duller bird indeed), the Gouldian has different 'morphs' (versions) all in the one location.

The immature birds are pretty well brown all over, but the adults all have yellow stomachs, green backs, turquoise collars and lilac breasts.

The morphs are all demonstrated in the head colour.

Of the adults, 75% have black heads, 24% are red headed and 1% have a golden head. The latter two versions also have black bibs, which are kind of lost in the black headed version.

There are only 2000 of these pretty birds through the northern band of Australia. There used to be thousands.

Cattle, trapping and burning have taken their toll. They are much sought after aviary birds, prized for their colours.

To add to the misery of the species, they also happened to be in the way of the much-vaunted railway to Darwin.

The track goes through an area that the Gouldian use as their Wet feeding ground.

It is pretty important to have a good feeding area in the Wet as that is also their breeding season.

Unfortunately at Yinberrie Hills, about 50 km north of Katherine, a bulldozer operator made a bit of a slip and managed to level 6358 sq/m more of the breeding area than had already been, by agreement with Parks and Wildlife, sacrificed for the train.

Parks and Wildlife have set upon ADrail, and a rescue package is underway.

Time, as they say, will tell, and all I can hope is the effect of the rescue package is not undermined by the Gouldians becoming very colourful splotches on the windscreen of the train, if one ever runs.

Anyway, the end of the meeting I am not supposed to write about had me despairing about tort law reform and I left hoping I would leave on a happier note than I was feeling.

I said to the Chief Minister "I want to talk to you about saving the Gouldian Finches" and she said "Don't worry Morrie, we'll save the Gouldian Finches".

'Well', I thought, 'at least the Government is committed to the resurrection of some habitats'.

And I really hope that Clare and the catfish never has to hear a sparrow (sic) fall. ☹

Qantas Club membership offer

The Law Society has negotiated a deal with the Law Council of Australia and Qantas and can now offer LSNT members Qantas Club membership at a reduced rate.

The normal rate for an individual joining the Qantas Club is \$614.24 for a year and \$869.16 for two years (including GST and joining fee). Under the LCA scheme, LSNT members can pay \$412.50 for a year or \$583 for two years (incl GST).

Existing Qantas Club members can join the scheme on expiry of their current membership.

This is a terrific offer for members and we're keen to launch it as a benefit to members.

Lorelei Fong Lim will be sending out letters outlining further details of the scheme but if you're interested now, please don't hesitate to contact her at the Law Society Secretariat on 8981 5104.