

Fidler on the case

on the
wing

DON KNOWLER



THE survival of the Gouldian finch, one of the most vividly coloured birds in the world, seems a long way from the mean, post-war streets of Manchester in northern England.

However, a British bird-lover who first saw the species as a cage bird is investing at least \$1 million to guarantee Gouldian finches have a place in the wild for future generations.

Multi-millionaire Mike Fidler is coy about how much of his fortune he has devoted to the bird over the years but he is on record as giving a single donation of \$600,000 to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy specifically for Gouldian finch conservation.

The amazing story of Fidler's involvement with the finch goes back to a day, 40 years ago, when he was walking down a bleak street in Manchester. He happened to look in a pet shop window where he saw birds so colourful they looked as though they'd rolled in a rainbow.

Fidler was late for a meeting but he rushed inside and asked the store owner what the birds were.

"Gouldian finches," came the reply – and Fidler returned to buy 10.

That moment changed his life and, although he became a successful businessman in Britain with his own chemical company, he never forgot the day when he first set eyes on the finches.

With the help of Fidler's donations, the Conservancy, a charity dedicated to threatened species conservation, is working to restore populations of Gouldian finches to areas where the endangered birds once thrived.

One such location is the Kimberley in Western Australia, where the organisation owns and manages the 3120sq km Mornington Station.

The tiny Gouldian finch (*Erythrura gouldiae*)



RARE BEAUTY: A Gouldian finch.

was first described by 19th-century ornithologist John Gould, who named the species "Lady Gouldian finch" in honour of his late wife.

Like other birds found in Australia, including the budgerigar and the zebra finch, they soon became popular as cage birds in Victorian Britain.

In the wild, though, they were to go into decline as European settlement expanded across

the savanna woodlands of northern Australia.

The finches once lived right across the tropical north but now there are thought to be fewer than 2000. Nowhere is there a colony of more than 250, making them extremely vulnerable to environmental changes.

Fidler is famous in finch circles for being one of the first to master the bird's husbandry. He has now retired to Australia and breeds finches in aviaries on his property in New South Wales.

The main reason for the collapse of the bird's numbers is believed to be land burning by cattlemen, which is far more intense and widespread than that practised in the past by Aborigines.

The fires reduce the crops of native grasses the finches depend on to survive. This is compounded by the manner in which cattle graze, which restricts regrowth of a variety of grasses important for the survival of whole ecosystems.

The Gouldian finch is just one – the most celebrated – of several native bird and mammal species fast disappearing because of habitat change in the tropical north and they include the Carpentarian rock-rat, Carpentarian grass-wren and the partridge pigeon. All, like the Gouldians, are grass-seed feeders.

I have never met Fidler but I feel I share a connection with him

simply because my love of Australian birds came partly from seeing zebra finches in pet shops in my native London, as I wrote last year in my book *Dancing on the Edge of the World*.

I've since seen zebra finches in the wild but the Gouldians have eluded me so far.

Thanks to Fiddler, I and other bird lovers will still have a chance to marvel at their indescribable beauty in their natural setting.