

**An interesting case of mortality in the Gouldian Finch.**—Only the very wise and the very ignorant dare judge the value of scientific investigations. This point is well illustrated by recent discussions in *The Auk*, where it has been admitted tacitly (e.g., *Auk*, 82: 616, 1965) or even overtly (e.g., *Auk*, 82: 651, 1965) that various observations were in fact insignificant.

Stimulated by the possibilities of investigations of this sort, I here report an instance of mortality in the Gouldian Finch (*Poephila gouldiae*) which gains interest by being not only insignificant but also unique. During the night of 27–28 January 1966, in our laboratory at The University of Michigan, an adult female black-faced Gouldian Finch, banded on the left leg with a green plastic band (number 5), scratched her right eye with her right foot. The claw of the outside toe (digit 4) struck the edge of the nictitating membrane, penetrated, and stuck. Thus entangled, the bird fell from the perch into a pan of drinking water, where in the darkness she drowned, claw still caught in nictitating membrane (Figure 1, upper).

Admittedly, this incident occurred in an artificial situation. Yet, it cannot be gainsaid that all of the essential elements of the situation can be replicated in the wild, to wit, the roosting, scratching bird, the perch near or over the water, and

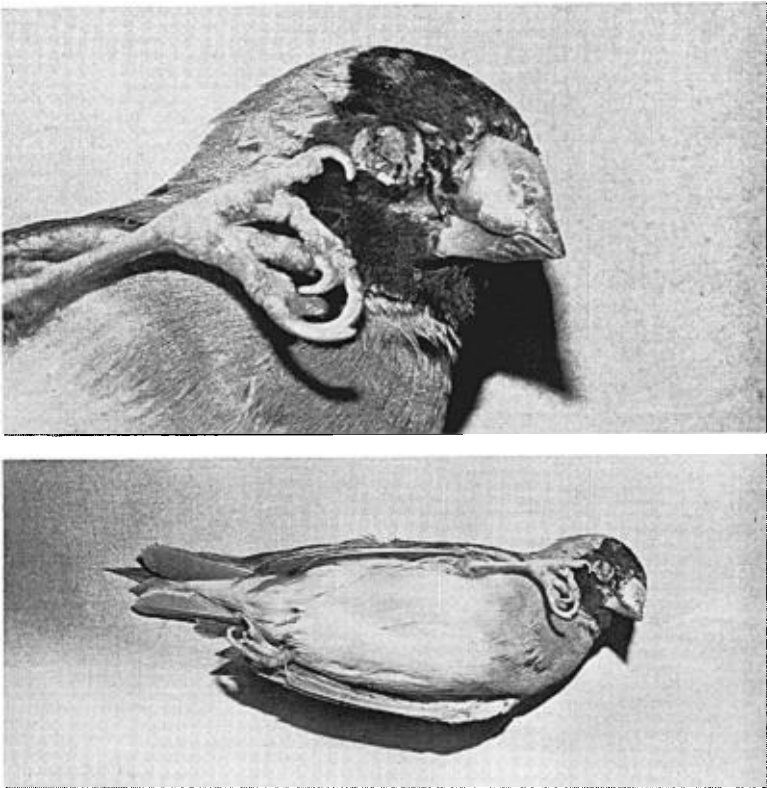


Figure 1. Upper, Gouldian Finch showing claw of digit 4 stuck in nictitating membrane. Lower, same bird showing position of wing relative to right foot.

the possibility of the claw's penetrating the membrane. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the claw on digit 4 of the bird in question in no way differs from the corresponding claw of wild-taken Gouldian Finches.

Still another fascinating aspect of this avian tragedy is that the position of the deceased bird (Figure 1, lower) indicates that the bird was scratching directly (under the wing), rather than indirectly (over the wing) as I have observed to be the usual mode of head scratching in this tropical species. It might be cogently argued that the bird somehow withdrew its wing in the struggle to extricate the claw. A tolerant reader will admit the alternative hypothesis, however, that the bird was, in fact, scratching directly and that this abnormal behavior was in itself responsible for the careless application of claw to eye, resulting in the bird's untimely demise. Here we have an instance of natural selection operating to maintain behavioral responses within certain prescribed limits, to the detriment of the individual certainly, but perhaps to the great gain of the species. The question then arises: Is this insignificant mortality, or do we have here the very stuff of evolution?

A search of the literature reveals no previous record of mortality from this cause in the Gouldian Finch.—HARRISON B. TORDOFF, *The University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, Ann Arbor, Michigan*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Publication of this paper has been made possible through the generosity of an anonymous donor.—Ed.