

Birds of a Feather



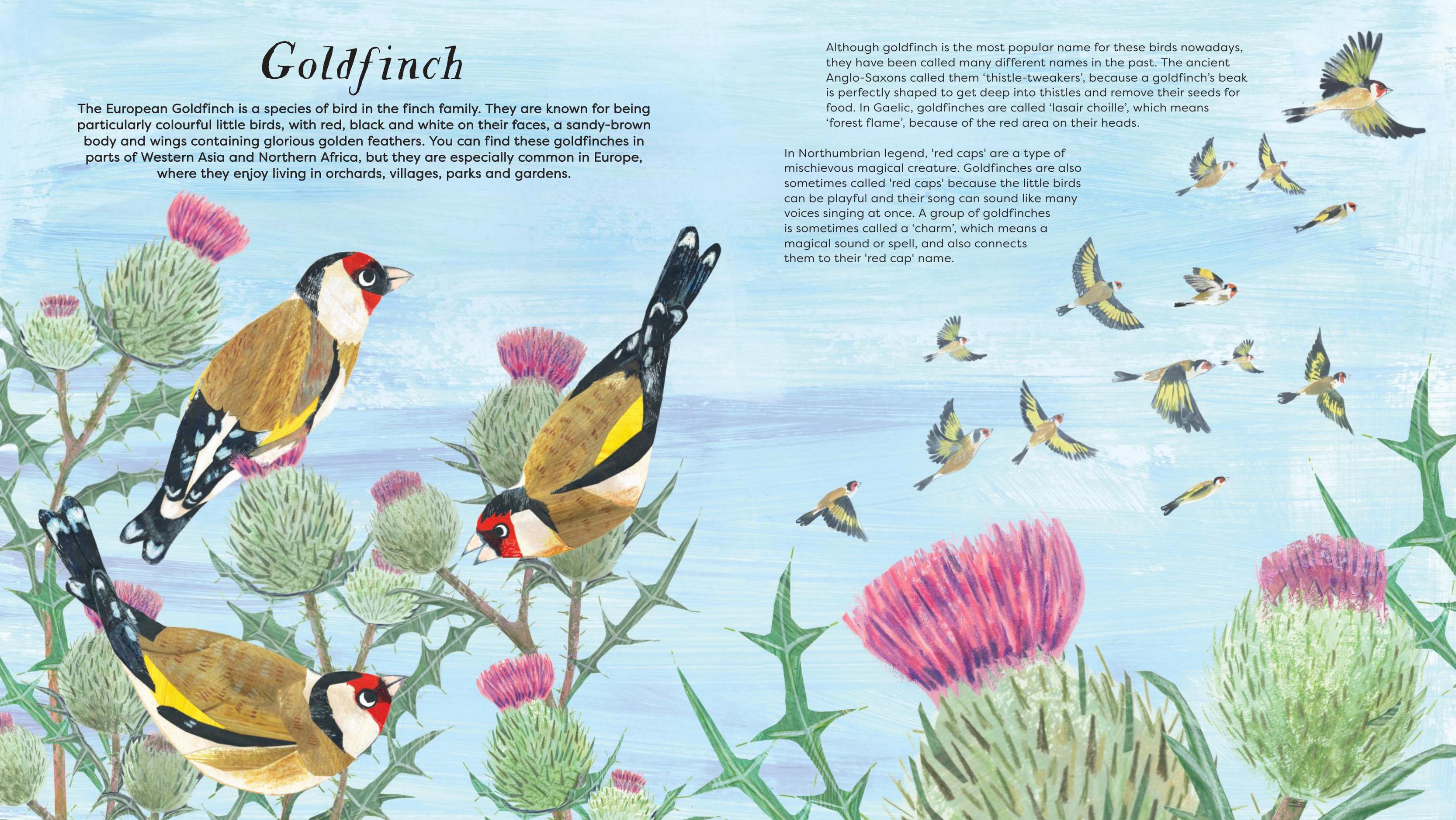
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Goldfinch

The European Goldfinch is a species of bird in the finch family. They are known for being particularly colourful little birds, with red, black and white on their faces, a sandy-brown body and wings containing glorious golden feathers. You can find these goldfinches in parts of Western Asia and Northern Africa, but they are especially common in Europe, where they enjoy living in orchards, villages, parks and gardens.

Although goldfinch is the most popular name for these birds nowadays, they have been called many different names in the past. The ancient Anglo-Saxons called them 'thistle-tweakers', because a goldfinch's beak is perfectly shaped to get deep into thistles and remove their seeds for food. In Gaelic, goldfinches are called 'lasair choille', which means 'forest flame', because of the red area on their heads.

In Northumbrian legend, 'red caps' are a type of mischievous magical creature. Goldfinches are also sometimes called 'red caps' because the little birds can be playful and their song can sound like many voices singing at once. A group of goldfinches is sometimes called a 'charm', which means a magical sound or spell, and also connects them to their 'red cap' name.



Magpie

Magpies are well-known birds throughout much of the world, and you can spot common magpies all year round in farmland and gardens across Europe and parts of Asia. Throughout Asia there are also relatives of the common magpie, but these birds are bright and multicoloured where the common magpie is darker. The common magpie isn't boring to look at though – while they can look simply black and white from far away, their glossy feathers turn magnificent shades of green and blue in different lights.

These birds are known for being loud and curious, and their name in English links to this. The 'mag' part of magpie comes from a time in the UK when it was common to name animals after people. 'Mag' is a shortening of 'Margaret', and it's thought that this name was given to the birds because they chatter loudly like a gossiping human.

In European cultures the magpie can represent good luck or a bad omen, but elsewhere they are a purely positive symbol. Magpies are the national bird of South Korea and they are seen as a sign of good luck both there and in other areas of Asia. Hundreds of years ago, Chinese farmers were happy when they saw a magpie, because they knew that the birds would help them by eating insects that were ruining their crops.

There is also a Chinese legend where two lovers are separated by a wide river and are brought back together by helpful magpies. The group of magpies make themselves into a bridge, so that the human couple can finally meet again under the starry sky.



To Ciara, thank you for everything

– L. F.

To my Mum and Aunty Pat, with love always

– K. R.



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