

Vanished and Vanishing Parrots: Profiling Extinct and Endangered Species

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BOOK REVIEW

Vanished and Vanishing Parrots: Profiling Extinct and Endangered Species

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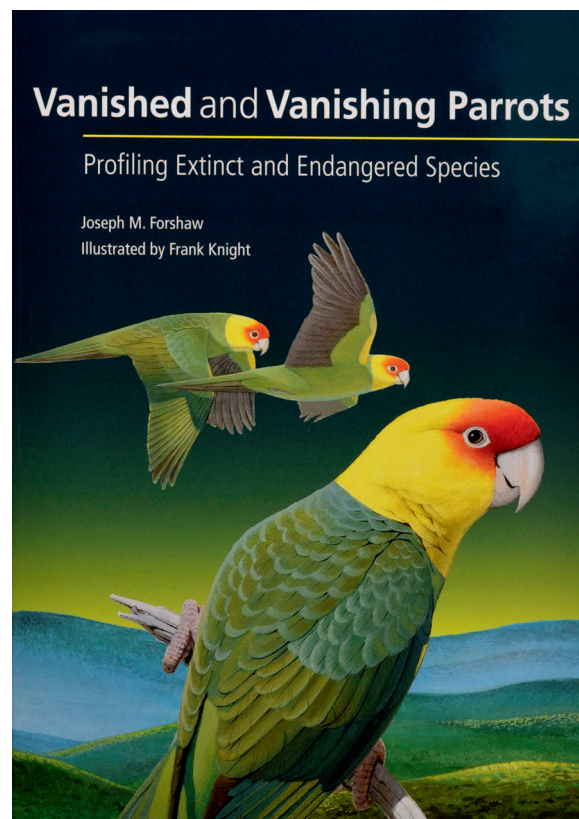
Vanished and Vanishing Parrots: Profiling Extinct and Endangered Species by Joseph M. Forshaw. Illustrated by Frank Knight. 2017. Comstock, Ithaca, NY, USA. xxvi + 323 pp., 58 color plates, 8 text figures. \$95 (hardcover). ISBN 9781501704697.

I must start with a confession: I am an unabashed fanboy of Joe Forshaw. I spent my entire career as a graduate student with the third edition of his classic *Parrots of the World* (Forshaw 1989) on my desk, and now, 25 years later, it still remains within arm's reach on my shelf. That magisterial work was an absolute treasure trove for a young scientist who found parrots fascinating but was only starting to figure out what made them so. It combined detailed accounts of all the extant species with gorgeous paintings by William Cooper. The species accounts weaved together physical descriptions and range maps with descriptions of ecology and behavior gleaned from a broad array of literature and Forshaw's own observations from museums and the field. The abundant details in these accounts provided a wealth of information for comparative studies, while the illustrations fired the imagination with their lifelike depictions of the parrots in their habitats. The several revised editions of *Parrots of the World* were followed in 2006 by the large-format *Parrots of the World: An Identification Guide* (Forshaw 2006), with paintings by Frank Knight, and in 2010 by the smaller-format field

guide *Parrots of the World* (Forshaw 2010), also illustrated by Knight. Each of these successive volumes varied in their level of detail but retained the general format of combining basic information for all parrot species with high-quality illustrations.

Now we have the latest installment in this long-running series, *Vanished and Vanishing Parrots: Profiling Extinct and Endangered Species*. It follows the tried-and-true formula of Forshaw's previous works by combining written species accounts with museum-quality illustrations. Given the number of times Forshaw and his artist collaborators have gone down this path, it is fair to ask the question "What is new here?" The answer is "Quite a bit." To start, the book does not focus on all parrots, but only on those that were officially classified as Endangered, Critically Endangered, or Recently Extinct according to the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN 2016), plus a few taxa that the author deemed particularly vulnerable. It is a sad commentary on the state of parrot conservation that the 74 species included here represent almost 20% of the 398 cur-

rently recognized extant parrot species, and that if Forshaw had chosen to expand his focus to include species classified as Vulnerable and Near Threatened, the number would have grown to 172 species, or 43% of all extant parrot species (IUCN 2016). Although there have been some notable successes in parrot conservation, in general this



situation has been getting worse rather than better, driven primarily by ongoing habitat loss and capture for the pet trade. Forshaw chose to narrow his focus to endangered parrots precisely to highlight this pressing conservation dilemma.

The heart of the book is the collection of species accounts. These are divided into three biogeographic distributions reflecting the three main centers of parrot diversity: Australasian, Afro-Asian, and Neotropical. Each of these distributions is prefaced by a deeply researched history of human interactions with parrots in the region. I found these sections to be particularly illuminating, with many interesting details gleaned from historical accounts. For example, I was surprised to discover that early explorers to the Mascarene Islands described no less than six distinct endemic parrot species that coexisted with the Dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) and Rodrigues Solitaire (*Pezophaps solitaria*). Of these six, only the Echo Parakeet (*Psittacula eques*) now survives, and only as a result of intensive and sustained conservation efforts. The others are thought to have gone extinct from excessive hunting, like the Dodo and Rodrigues Solitaire before them.

The species accounts within each of these three distributions are organized taxonomically and reflect recent phylogenetic hypotheses. Each species account begins with a physical description of plumage and morphological measures based on museum specimens, a range map, and a section on conservation status with extensive citations of both peer-reviewed papers and the grayer literature of conservation reports and public articles. Following these are sections on ecological habitats, general behavior, communication signals, diet and feeding, and breeding biology based on the literature and supplemented, in many cases, by Forshaw's own observations. Each is accompanied by a full-color painting by Knight that delights the eye while managing to capture unique and telling details of both the species and its habitat. The length of the species accounts necessarily varies, based on the information available, but each represents a substantial work, and collectively they constitute an impressive scholarly feat.

Preceding these species accounts is a collection of introductory material that provides valuable context for what is to come. These include a chapter on the fossil history of parrots by Walter Boles and an introduction by Forshaw that provides an overview of conservation issues facing parrots. The standout section, though, is a foreword by Noel Snyder, who has had a long and impactful career in parrot conservation. Snyder gives a thoughtful overview of the conservation history of three Neotropical parrots species with which he has personal experience. Two of these, the Puerto Rican Parrot (*Amazona vittata*) and

Thick-billed Parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*) are extant, while the third is the extinct Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*). I too have worked on all three species, and I was impressed with the balance and insight Snyder brought to his retrospective of the long and sometimes tortuous struggle to understand the threats faced by these species. I found particularly compelling his point that conservation is a dynamic and context-specific science in which the challenges to a species may be specific not only to that species, but also to a particular time and place in that species' history. Consequently, these challenges may well change as populations either recover or decline further. This dynamic nature means that the solutions that work in the present may not work in the future and, thus, must be evaluated regularly and modified to changing circumstances. This is an important insight with applications to conservation well beyond parrots.

In sum, this is a valuable book with a great many strengths. Forshaw is a master of collecting pertinent information from a broad array of sources; the result is a rich collection of species accounts that surpasses in detail those in any of his preceding books. The artwork by Knight complements these accounts and brings them to vibrant life. Particularly compelling in this respect are the illustrations of extinct species, which are often based on educated surmises but nonetheless offer valuable insight into these vanished species. If there is any weakness to this book, it is the relative lack of synthesis offered by Forshaw. There is a wealth of detail here on the biology of 74 parrot species that are either extinct or nearly so, but beyond the introduction relatively little effort is made to pull out the broad patterns of this conservation catastrophe. It will fall to others to make use of these details to feed quantitative and other synthetic approaches that will help guide conservation biologists as they try to reverse these declines. That caveat notwithstanding, this new collaboration by Forshaw and Knight will be of tremendous value to those interested in parrots in particular, and in avian conservation in general.

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