Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parrakeet

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Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parrakeet.—Penny Olsen. 2007. National Library of Australia, Canberra ACT 2600. xii + 259 pp., 69 color illustrations, 95 black-and-white illustrations. ISBN 9780642276520. Paper, $34.95.—Who, in times past, was not intrigued and delighted when the Bermuda Petrel (*Pterodroma cahow*), the Masked Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus ridgwayi*), the Black-footed Ferret (*Mustela nigripes*), and the Coelacanth (*Latimeria chalumnae*) were found to still exist after having disappeared, seemingly forever? Rediscoveries of charismatic lost species are events of tremendous general interest and often receive widespread publicity. They also provide us with a second chance for active conservation of these species—an opportunity to correct ecological sins of the past—to say nothing of the chance to travel backwards in our imagination to a time when the future of the natural world did not seem quite so bleak. Not

all rediscovered species recover to a viable status, but those given major conservation efforts sometimes do, and the latter provide a continuing motive force for attempts to find other such species.

In *Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parrakeet*, we come to appreciate that whatever else it may represent, the search for lost species can also become a thoroughly consuming passion for those who come under its spell. Penny Olsen's book is a meticulously researched account of people bewitched by the remarkable Paradise Parakeet (*Psephotus pulcherrimus*), an extraordinarily colorful Australian species that first disappeared by the early 20th century, was rediscovered in the 1920s, but soon disappeared again, though it is still reported with some frequency today by the ever hopeful. Species thought long extinct sometimes *are* truly confirmed as still in existence, but the chances of this occurring again with the Paradise Parakeet now seem tiny and steadily diminishing. Olsen is not one of the optimists on this score, though she has developed a very thorough and enjoyable chronicle of the Paradise Parakeet's biology and history, together with a plausible discussion of the reasons for its demise.

The Paradise Parakeet (also known as the Paradise Parrot or Parrakeet, or, alternatively, the Beautiful Parrot or Parrakeet) was not the sort of species one would expect to be highly vulnerable to extinction. It was evidently not an extreme *K*-selected species and not a species characterized by great wariness or extreme tameness. It was not known to be under special duress from any natural enemies or disease. Nor was it dependent on food resources that were generally rare. It was not large enough to be considered a game bird, nor was it a pest species arousing campaigns of extermination.

What it was, instead, was a basically pastoral species, making only modest demands of its surroundings. It was a bird of relatively widespread dry and open habitats feeding primarily on grass seeds. Its nest sites were chambers chewed into terrestrial termite mounds, a substrate that was also reasonably common and widespread. Yet this parakeet may already have been uncommon (there is conflicting evidence on this score) when John Gilbert first discovered it in southeastern Queensland, near Brisbane, in May 1844. Within only a few decades, it could no longer be found by anyone.

Gilbert, an intrepid explorer wandering the Australian continent in search of new bird species for his employer, John Gould of England, did not live to see the parakeet officially named. He was killed in a fracas with aborigines only about a year after shipping off the first specimens to Gould, and he never knew whether Gould had honored his request that the bird be named after him (he had not).

Following its discovery, the parakeet was found to be already quite limited in range, and because it was so colorful (at least the males were), it soon came under pressure from live-bird collectors who were supplying both resident bird-fanciers and a burgeoning international aviculturists' market. Sadly, the Paradise Parakeet, unlike the more common Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) and Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*), did not adapt well to confinement and proved almost impossible to breed in captivity. No self-sustaining captive populations were ever established.

Nevertheless, Olsen does not attribute extinction of the Paradise Parakeet primarily to the bird collectors. Nor does she attribute its disappearance mainly to the common Australian practice of grinding up termite mounds to make flooring for houses and substrates for roads and tennis courts. The termites survive in good numbers today despite such practices. Although the destruction of termite mounds and trapping of birds surely contributed to the demise of the Paradise Parakeet, Olsen focuses primary attention on the nearly universal overgrazing of the grassland habitats in its range by domestic livestock (as well as introduced rabbits), coupled with the effects of unwise burning practices and severe drought around the turn of the 20th century. The photographs and descriptions she supplies of range conditions at the time the species disappeared document an appalling degree of habitat degradation.

The Paradise Parakeet was one of three allopatric species (two of which are still extant) of closely related Australian grass parakeets. The three—the Golden-shouldered Parakeet (*P. chrysopterygius*) of the Cape York Peninsula on the northeastern corner of the continent, the Hooded Parakeet (*P. dissimilis*) of the Northern Territory south of Darwin, and the Paradise Parakeet of southeastern Queensland—are all quite similar in appearance and might well be considered a superspecies. Aside from their common diet of grass seeds and their common choice of termite mounds as nest sites, these species were also characterized as having evolved an unusual commensal relationship with moth caterpillars feeding on their nestlings' fecal material—that is, at least the Golden-shouldered and Hooded parakeets exhibit tight symbiotic relationships with moth species found nowhere else but in their nest sites. The same may well have been true of the Paradise Parakeet, though this was never documented, probably mainly because the phenomenon was not discovered in its congeners until after the last fully confirmed nest of the Paradise Parakeet was observed in 1922, a nest that did not produce young. Thus, the extinction of the Paradise Parakeet may well have entailed the extinction of a highly specialized moth species at the same time.

Much of Olsen's beautifully illustrated book is focused on 20th-century searches for the parakeet and is fascinating in its examination of the outright fraud, misplaced conservation intentions, and missed opportunities of many of those captivated by the species. She presents particular detail on the failings of Alec Chisholm, a journalist whose life was seemingly centered about this bird but who only once observed the species (for about two to three hours in 1922) and who evidently accomplished virtually nothing of conservation significance on its behalf while a remnant population still existed, despite writing numerous articles on his role with the species.

Olsen is also critical of the roles played by others, for example, Florence Irby, whose oft-repeated claims that the species sometimes nested in riverbanks and was resident in New South Wales in the 1920s have never been confirmed. Olsen also dismisses as frauds the five clutches of eggs of the species claimed in the late 1960s by Robert Guyatt, noting that the eggs (many of which still exist) are too large to be those of the Paradise Parakeet and that Guyatt's rough drawing of a termite-mound nest site differed in architecture from the confirmed sites found by others.

Nevertheless, Guyatt's eggs are only slightly larger than known Paradise Parakeet eggs, and egg size is a notoriously variable characteristic within parrot species, often correlated strongly with female identity. Especially when sample sizes of females are very small, as is the case here, measurements of known eggs do not likely encompass the full size range for a species. Thus, egg size alone can be an unreliable characteristic on which to dismiss the validity of eggs—see the discussion in Snyder (2004) regarding

similar controversies with disputed egg specimens of the Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*). Much more persuasive than egg-size comparisons would be DNA testing of the suspect eggs, as techniques are now available for extracting DNA from blown eggs and determining whether it matches the DNA from known skin specimens (see Chilton and Sorenson 2007). If such techniques are ever applied to Guyatt's purported Paradise Parakeet eggs, a clear resolution of the issue may well emerge.

Olsen's heroes in the twilight of the Paradise Parakeet were the Barnard brothers, Charles and Harry, who documented the first nest of the species in 1882, and Cyril Jerrard, who not only rediscovered the species in 1921 but successfully photographed both a male and a female at a nest in 1922. The son of a rancher in southeastern Queensland, Jerrard was evidently very modest about his discovery and accomplishments and never published on the species, allowing Alec Chisholm to repeatedly publish his photographs and data, often without receiving credit for his contributions. Despite Chisholm's questionable treatment of Jerrard, Olsen has high praise for an unpublished account of the species that Jerrard wrote in 1924, and it appears that Jerrard was still seeing the species in the neighborhood of his home as late as 1927. It was indeed Jerrard who took Chisholm to see the species in late 1922, so there can be no reasonable doubt of the validity of his sightings and photographs of the species. Sadly, no concerted conservation efforts followed Jerrard's rediscovery of the species, despite the publicity given this rediscovery by Chisholm.

Reports of the species continued after Jerrard's observations, and Olsen considers a number of sightings to be credible through the 1930s and into the 1940s, but none was so well documented as those of Jerrard, and no undisputed nests of the species were reported after Jerrard's nest of 1922. Purported sightings of the species also continued through the last half of the 20th century, and Olsen discusses a number of notorious reports from this period in great detail. None proved reliable.

Thus, as ably presented in this absolutely fascinating book, the Paradise Parakeet now appears to occupy the realm of bigfoots and alien abductions. This does not mean that a journey through the history of this species is without purpose. Olsen's book is a wonderful account of many Australian birds and ornithologists, and of the evolving psychology of our own species regarding conservation. Some of the characters playing principal roles in the drama of the Paradise Parakeet (e.g., John Gould and Carl Lumholz) are the very same individuals who played important roles in the history of certain North American birds, for example the Imperial Woodpecker (*Campephilus imperialis*) of Mexico, another of the species presently lost in the limbo of near-extinction or extinction.

For readers in the Western Hemisphere, the history of the Paradise Parakeet parallels recent and not-so-recent lore on the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*C. principalis*) and Carolina Parakeet in numerous ways, including countless plausible sightings that seemingly never get fully confirmed, people hoping to recreate lost species by hybridization or selective breeding of other species, and cults of believers forever grasping at new hypotheses that will allow them to deny extinction as the most likely status of the species in question. If for no other reason than its evaluation of how human emotions and dreams can play havoc with perception, Olsen's book is one that all ornithologists should read and ponder. I recommend it highly, especially for North American ornithologists seeking perspectives on the plight of endangered bird species of other lands and reference points in the onging debates about the existence of such species as Imperial and Ivory-billed woodpeckers.—Noel F. R. Snyder, *P.O. Box 16426, Portal, Arizona 85632, USA. E-mail: nfrs16426@vtc.net*

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