

Book reviews

GLIMPSES OF PARADISE – THE QUEST FOR THE BEAUTIFUL PARRAKEET

By Penny Olsen

2007. Published by National Library of Australia, Canberra. 270 pp., many colour and black and white illustrations. Paperback, \$A34.95, ISBN 978-0-642-27652-0.

Having just reviewed Brian Garfield's excellent but depressing *The Meinertzhagen Mystery: The Life and Legend of a Colossal Fraud*, I found *Glimpses of Paradise* to be another excruciating indictment of white man's relationship with the natural environment. After absorbing the details in her masterful book, we can only agree with Penny Olsen's conclusion that the Paradise Parrot (*Psephotus pulcherrimus*; PP hereafter) is extinct, that it has been since the late 1920s, and that all reports of the charming little parrot since then have been invented (whether consciously or otherwise) by forgers, congenital liars, selfish egotists, traffickers and smugglers, or by people who just cannot correctly use a field-guide (however as-plain-as-your-face it might be). As Penny says, 'so many scams and dead ends do not add up to a still living species'.

The saddest part is that so many of the characters that were associated with the PP when it did exist should have known better. Alec Chisholm spent many years insisting the parrot was 'his' bird, that he was going to save it from extinction, that he knew where it lived (even up to 30 years after the last bird had been sighted), and that no-one else's opinion mattered. He is not forgiven for so much talk, so little action, and for so overstating his role. After having read many of his letters in the Mitchell Library, I can only concur with Penny's distaste for the 'quarrelsome' journalist. Florence Irby, looking fearsome in woollen stockings on page 168, misidentified birds as being PP for many years. There is no apparent explanation for this, nor for the 1990s 'sightings' claimed by farmer's boy Chris Kiernan, which led to several extensive, expensive and useless searches. Worst of all was the smuggler Joe Mattinson, whose 'amazing violet eyes' would mist over while he recounted yet another tall tale about the invisible PP which he had bred in captivity, but which had conveniently died in storms, fires or other tragic circumstances.

We at last meet a truly decent cove: Cyril Jerrard of Blackdown Station, the only person who can be proved to have photographed the PP alive, and whose meticulous unpublished notes and observations are made available on the National Library of Australia's website – how useful, interesting and important they are, too. Jerrard became very fond of his ornithological friends, with their 'very intense little personality under the beautiful exterior'. There is also a nod to the indefatigable and unassuming William Rae McLennan, who obtained Golden-shouldered Parrots after they had been presumed extinct, and contributed to knowledge of the PP with his careful notes on how moth larvae cleaned the nests of this other ant-hill parrot, timing their life-cycle to exactly complement that of the birds. They even cleaned the feet and feathers of the chicks.

How infuriating it is that so many PP were collected for the aviculturalists of the world, only for most to die within weeks. The failure to establish breeding populations in captivity was compounded by young males often being mistaken for females,

and for the fact that it was only a few people who realised that PP would try to burrow into walls as an alternative to nesting in termite mounds. The parrot's future in captivity was not helped by over-excitability: one male introduced to a new female started frantically to display to her, fell off his perch and died. Penny has also very carefully researched all known PP eggs extant in collections, with the conclusion that the Guyatt eggs of 1967, from Glendower Station, are too large to be from PP. She is also sure that all correctly identified clutches were collected from termite mounds, and that reports that the PP nested in trees or riverbanks are mistaken or invented. The fact that the birds seemed to nest in the same termite mound year after year probably contributed to their downfall.

The book is full of wonderful illustrations, some arriving out of left field, such as a great old photograph from about 1894 of an ox-cart crossing the Comet River. We are shocked to realise the genteel image of Edwardians playing tennis in their Sunday best had come at the expense of numerous termite mounds which had been ground up for the court's hard core. Squatters' homes often had floors and fireplaces made from the same material. How many eggs of the PP went into the mix? Two striking oil paintings of PP by Tony Pridham have also been reproduced in the book. In one, a bright and jaunty pair is perching on their termite mound nest site, peering towards the entrance hole of their nest, perhaps getting ready to lay another year's eggs. This image is reproduced again on the cover, but here the female is fading eloquently into extinction; on the title page the male too becomes a sad shadow of its former self. In the other Pridham painting, where the pair are about to drink from a puddle left in a hoofprint, we are aghast to find out that not only was this left by one of the multitudinous domestic animals whose overgrazing so contributed to the parrots' downfall, but that these puddles were often poisoned by farmers as a way of killing rabbits. Another artistic treat: Penny has persuaded the venerable artist William Cooper to paint a new plate just for this book.

The story continues on its downward spiral: almost certainly the PP had its own attendant species of house-cleaning moth, as do the two surviving species of ant-hill parrot. The conclusion therefore is that there were two, not one, extinctions, and the details of the moth we shall never know. The story of these two extinctions is joined by the demise of the Waga-Waga, the indigenous people who inhabited the Darling Downs before Europeans arrived, and who had sustained the right ecological conditions for the PP by their systematic use of burning grass. Drought, settlement, overgrazing, cats, collecting and the destruction of nesting mounds must have finished the bird off.

Having been for many years the naturalist John Gilbert's greatest fan, I had particular interest in Chapter 2, which details the earliest specimens of the PP. Ian McAllan's dogged research on an apparently illegible Gilbert manuscript in the Mitchell Library in Sydney revealed the crucial information that a PP now in National Museums Liverpool (NML) in the UK, must be the first ever collected. John Gilbert obtained this bird on the Condamine River between Tummaville and Yandilla on 17 May 1844. NML's Lord Derby Collection D.789a is now so festooned with labels denoting its importance that it has had to be strengthened with a dowling rod (see page 16).

What is also important is whether there are any PP specimens from the Leichhardt Expedition, which Gilbert joined in September 1844. His written observations of PP continued from the Darling Downs northwards, through what is now Queensland, until the party had reached the Comet River area, and in most cases these represent the only known records. What would we give for a confirmatory specimen or two! Detective work reveals that John Gould sent the 13th Earl of Derby two PP in July 1845 (see Gould's letter to Lord Derby dated 10 July 1845, now in Liverpool City Libraries, UK). These must have been the two Gilbert specimens from the Darling Downs, collected in May and July 1844, still in the Lord Derby Collection (now both in NML). Gould sent Lord Derby another specimen in September 1846, which was amongst a consignment of Gilbert's birds collected during the Leichhardt Expedition (see Gould's letter to Lord Derby dated 9 September 1846, now in the Natural History Museum, London). However, only Gilbert's two Darling Downs specimens survive in NML today. Where is the Leichhardt Expedition specimen? There are three PP specimens listed in Lord Derby's stockbooks, but the third is a specimen from 'New Zealand' obtained from the dealer Williams in December 1845. Did Lord Derby decline to buy Gould's third specimen? Did he give it to someone else? Will it turn up in another collection one day? Penny Olsen's meticulous survey of museum collections makes this unlikely – although we can take heart from the fact that her work did bring to light a third Gilbert specimen from the Darling Downs, collected in July 1844 and now in the possession of Harvard University.

A clue to the possible whereabouts of a PP specimen from the Leichhardt Expedition is found within a statement made by Meyer de Schauensee in his 1957 paper 'On some avian types, principally Gould's, in the collection of the Academy' (*Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*, volume *cix*: 171). He wrote incorrectly that the PP had been first discovered by Gilbert at Kents' Lagoon on 20 October 1844, when the Leichhardt Expedition was somewhat north-west of Jimbour House. De Schauensee probably got this locality and date information from the bottom of the stand on which one of the ANSP Gould Collection PP specimens stood – in those days the birds from this collection were mounted. However, infuriatingly, not only had all the original labels been taken off the cabinet skins of Gould's Australian collection in 1847, while they were being converted to mounted specimens (with at least some of the data being scribbled on the underneath of the stands), but in the 20th century the mounts were reduced back to skins and the stands thrown away. Only guesswork remains, and we do not now know which of the ANSP specimens had these data. Penny thinks perhaps this was the third PP sent by John Gould to Lord Derby, and he had sent it back to Gould to replace one that had been stolen from Gould's house in London in 1845 – but then Gould had sent it to Lord Derby in 1846. Incidentally – as regards the photographs of the ANSP specimens of PP – of the four females in the photograph on page 20, the left-hand one (ANSP 22911) is probably *not* a Gilbert specimen, but the two middle one are.

A few slips: Gilbert did not come back to London in 1840 with John Gould, but blagged his way instead to Port Essington, on the Cobourg Peninsula of the north coast, where he discovered a huge number of new Australian bird species. 'Guilford'

should be Guildford. John Gould's father was a gardener at Windsor Castle, not Stokehill Villa, in 1817. The Earls of Derby are not the Earls of Knowsley but live in a rather nice Hall bearing that name, and the 13th Earl of Derby *did* have success in breeding birds, most notably being the first person to breed the rare Néné, or Sandwich Island Goose, in captivity. His aviaries at Knowsley were also the venue for the first Budgerigars to be bred in Britain, in 1848. The Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, not the American Museum of Natural History in New York, purchased Gould's Australian collection in 1847 (caption on page 21), and this sale did not include any eggs (page 34).

None of these detract from a masterful monograph, however. This is an essential book for any library, private or public, and for anyone with an interest in how *not* to save a species from extinction. Read it with great regret. As Cyril Jerrard put it in 1924: 'Directly by our avarice and thoughtlessness, and indirectly by our disturbance of the balance so nicely preserved by nature, we are undoubtedly accountable for the tragedy of this bird'.

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BOWERBIRDS: NATURE, ART & HISTORY

By Clifford B. Frith and Dawn W. Frith

2008. Published by Frith&Frith, Malanda. 304 pp., 270 colour and 50 monochrome illustrations. Hardback, \$A79.95, ISBN 9781876473631.

Claims about the special nature of particular bird taxa are commonplace, and are generally understood as being highly personal and therefore acceptably nuanced. For the bowerbirds, however, Clifford and Dawn Frith get straight to the point: 'the most remarkable, amazing and even, incredible of all birds on earth'. It's a claim that they then proceed to substantiate with extraordinary descriptions, photographs, anecdotes and the fruit of literally years of direct observations. This is far more than a book that simply gathers together the published information on a group of birds: most of the endless facts presented here are literally the outcome of a lifetime of scientific devotion and dedication by the authors themselves.

The bowerbirds are a group of 20 moderately sized songbirds with largely unremarkable physiognomy but almost unbelievable behaviour, most notably the construction by males of elaborate structures entirely for attracting females. Although building the familiar avenue bower might appear to be defining, in fact, six species within the family build vertical structures known as 'maypoles' while one (the Tooth-billed) has dispensed with such structures and displays on a bare 'court' decorated with large leaves. All of these species are polygynous. The three catbird species, in contrast, are monogamous, with little evidence of the clear imprint of sexual selection.

Given this diversity of mating systems and behaviours, it is hardly surprising that the family has been the focus of attention from behavioural ecologists and evolutionary scientists from around the world. While such work has unquestionably been international in scope, it is also fair to state that most attention has been focussed on a small number of the more accessible