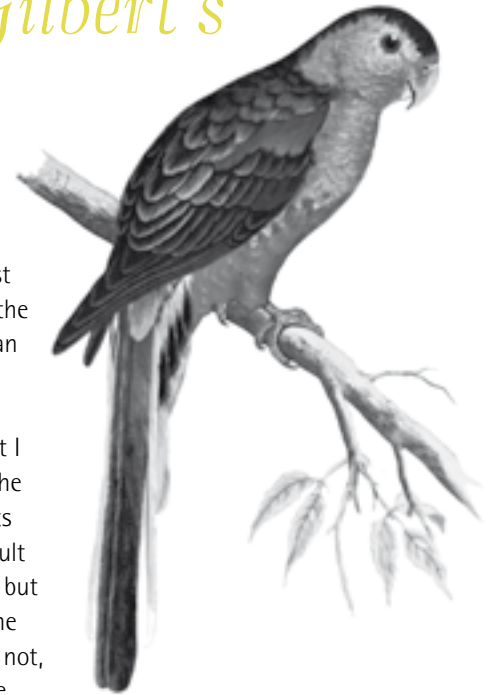


Further Glimpses of Mr Gilbert's 'Beautiful Parrakeet'



Penny Olsen adds a postscript to the paradise parrot's tale, following the Library's publication of her book *Glimpses of Paradise* last year

How do we know when a species goes extinct? Nineteenth-century Christian socialist, Charles Kingsley, captured the conundrum: 'no one has the right to say water babies don't exist till they have seen no water babies existing; which is quite a different thing, mind, from not seeing water babies'. This is not merely a question for philosophers—it has environmental, ethical and political implications too. Scientists sometimes apply the 50-year rule, as in 'no confirmed records in the past 50 years'. Yet some species, the charismatic ones, are harder for us to release into nothingness. So it is with the aptly named beautiful parrakeet, 'without exception the most beautiful of the whole tribe', as John Gilbert gushed in 1844 when he collected the first specimens of the new species.

As I uncovered in researching my book, *Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parrakeet*, published by the National Library last year, the paradise parrot, as the bird came to be known, has not been definitely sighted since 1928, and the most recent credible reports were made in the 1940s. This is not a cryptic bird or one that occurs remote from civilisation. Yet, it has been kept alive equally by more serious devotees and shysters. Every mention of the species in the media elicits a small rash of sightings. It has been reported from Casino (northern New South Wales) to Cape York in north Queensland, though it probably never actually occurred far outside the rich downs country of south-east Queensland.

In 2004, during a presentation I gave on the parrot's story, I suggested that it was extinct—deeply upsetting one attendee who believed he had seen one near the

New South Wales–Queensland border just a fortnight before. For some bird lovers, the paradise parrot is the thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) of the avian world: carrying the 'extinct' tag unacceptably.

In the preface to *Glimpses*, I wrote that I expected more pieces of the story—on the bird itself, the hype surrounding it, and its extinction—would come to light as a result of the book's publication. This happened, but like everything else in the parrot's tale, the results proved unexpected. The book has not, as I anticipated, triggered sightings of the bird. Instead, it has elicited further evidence of the parrot's allure, a phenomenon since its discovery back in the mid-1800s.

The 1970s was a period of extra-intense interest in the species. The conservation movement took off in Australia, with a focus on the rare and vanishing; at the same time a number of infamous illegal egg collectors, bird trappers and traders were also active. Much misinformation and out-and-out nonsense was bandied about. In response to *Glimpses'* publication, the fuzzy photo that so tantalised the bird world in the 1970s—shrouded in secrecy, and purporting to be of a wild paradise parrot taken somewhere in northern New South Wales—miraculously appeared after several years of empty promises. The bird's image was still as unidentifiable, unlabelled and suspect as ever, and gave no more clues on the parrot's survival.

Aviculturist Jim Paterson emailed me to say he had been one of the many who had gone searching in the 1970s. His story was typical, and captures the thrill of the chase—even if unsuccessful. In 1977, at the corner of a property on the Wandoan-Taroom back road, Jim was

out just after sunrise checking the pig traps and saw a flash of colour and a couple of birds through the foliage. It wasn't lorikeets; it was rosellas, or grass

above:
William Thomas Greene
(d.1906)
Beautiful or Paradise Parrakeet
reproduced from *Parrots in Captivity, Volume II* by William Thomas Greene
(London: George Bell and Sons, 1884)

below:
Glimpses of Paradise by Penny Olsen
(Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2007)





top:
Fakes: a hybrid pair of 'paradise' parrots (female at right), and the advertisement by a Nunawading birdseller in the early 1970s
Courtesy Charles Hibbert

right:
Harry Bright (1847–1896)
Parakeets and Robin in Australian Landscape
watercolour; 25.0 x 18.0 cm
Private collection
Courtesy J.B. Hawkins

parrots. The thought hit me and I got a hit of adrenaline that stood my hair up ... I followed them through the scrub ... and when I finally got close enough to identify them I saw my first scarlet-chested parrots in the wild and not where I ever expected to see them. But for those few minutes I thought I might have found the paradise.

Another well-known aviculturist, Charles Hibbert, was reminded of an advertisement that had appeared in the early 1970s. 'Inspired by your wonderful book,' he wrote, 'I was rummaging through the "bottom draw" and came across these two photos you may find interesting.' The first was a shot he took of a mounted specimen on display in the Museum of South Australia in 2006, which he immediately recognised as a fake. On speaking with the museum's bird department, Charles says they told him that because they didn't have the genuine article they had dummied one up from a mulga parrot skin to complete their display.

Hibbert's second snapshot was of the living birds offered for sale as 'paradise parrots' by a Nunawading birdseller, in about 1971 or 1972. He also still had *The Age* classified advertisement that had led him to dash out to the dealers, along with a note that the birds were originally purchased in Adelaide and the asking price was \$600. Enforcement saw that the advertisement and bogus birds were removed from sale. They were undoubtedly hybrids—some think a hooded parrot crossed with a mulga (a.k.a. many-coloured) parrot. Charles leans towards 'golden-shouldered x many-coloured, as they look like the hybrids

Bill Boyd of Gosford, NSW, was breeding in an attempt to "recreate" the paradise parrot.' In fact Boyd was not the only one attempting to reconstruct the vanished species—it was almost a cottage industry, led by the controversial Director of Taronga Zoo, Sir Edward Hallstrom. Nor was the Nunawading birdseller alone in claiming to hold the 'real thing', as I detail in *Glimpses*.

Another bird enthusiast, Bob Venn, contacted me from south-east Queensland to say that his wife Lyn had acquired an original Peter Slater painting of a pair of paradise parrots, which had proudly hung in their hallway for many years. 'All we ever knew was the parrot was extinct,' Venn wrote, before chancing on *Glimpses of Paradise*, which he 'hesitated in purchasing ... because extinction is so final and so very sad'. The painting had been published in the late-1970s in Slater's *Rare and Vanishing Australian Birds*, a book which reflected the growing awareness of what Australia was losing.

Yet more paradise parrotomania came to light. In an antique store near Rutherglen, Victoria, my daughter Anna discovered a small, framed work by a contemporary Melbourne artist and purchased it for the



princely sum of one dollar. Aptly, the bird is depicted looking furtively back over its shoulder. However, it is painted with the raised feathers of a dying bird—also appropriate, but entirely unintentional!

A more significant artwork was hanging in the home of Tasmanian antiques dealer, Jim Watson. The nineteenth-century watercolour was painted by Harry Bright (son and namesake of natural history artist, Henry Barnabus Bright; the younger Bright signed his work Harry or Hy Bright to distinguish his work). His subjects were mostly common British birds, but he also left several sentimental studies of Australian species including cockatoos, cockatiels and budgerigars. Watson's example is of a beautifully painted if fanciful Australian scene. Two accurately rendered paradise parrots (both male) perch together in the unlikely company of a male flame robin, a western ringneck, a band of budgerigars and two lyrebirds (one with a spectacularly lyrate tail) at a fern edged, lily-pad covered pond. Although these species would not occur together in nature, they had all been taken back to Britain during that period as live birds or specimens—part of the exotic plunder from the intriguing new southern colony.

From England, Martin Cotterill emailed me, attaching a photo-file of a stuffed specimen—a splendid male in fine condition. It is housed in an old, small glass cabinet. Admiring the fine taxidermy, he had picked the item up at a recent antiques fair, and was thrilled to later discover its occupant was an extinct parrot. A label pasted to the back of the case indicates that it had been held at 'R.D. & J.B. Fraser, Ltd., Ipswich [Queensland]', a 'furniture depository'. The faded handwriting on the label is unusual in that it gives a few clues as to the provenance of the specimen: 'Lake Clarendon, Gatton, 1890, Ground Parrot, Queensland'. Too many of the species were sent back to Europe, either stuffed and mounted, or as living specimens. The latter, if they survived the months at sea, soon died and ended up perched, lifeless and dataless on a mantle.

A taxidermist friend cleaned up the case for Cotterill and discovered another label, obscured by paper and a layer of paint, announcing the taxidermy business of Burton & Sons of Wardour Street, London.

In 1890, the son Walter Burton had succeeded his late father, Henry James. Possibly it was Walter who mounted the parakeet, although, as the depository slip indicates, the unfortunate bird may well have been prepared before it left its homeland and crossed the ocean.

Certainly, about this time, records of encounters with live parrots all but disappeared from the historical record until the species' brief rediscovery by Cyril Henry Jerrard of Gayndah (Queensland) in 1921.

Perhaps my journey with the paradise parrot ends here. More 'sightings' may possibly be made; still, I wonder whether I haven't finally killed off the extinct bird. It's sad when hope dies, sadder still when the world loses a species forever.

PENNY OLSEN is a Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University, the author of several books and editor of the Birds Australia magazine *Wingspan*. *Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parakeet* was published by the National Library in 2007; the appendices can be found on the National Library website at: www.nla.gov.au/pub/paradiseparrot/



above:

A pair of paradise parrots share a tender moment in this watercolour by Peter Slater reproduced from *Rare and Vanishing Australian Birds* by Peter Slater (Adelaide: Rigby, 1978)

below left:

Recently up for sale at a British antiques fair: a stuffed and mounted male paradise parrot languishing in a glass cabinet Courtesy Martin Cotterill

below right:

C.H.H. Jerrard (1889–1943) *Paradise Parrot* (*Psephotus pulcherrimus*) *Photographed in the Wild, Burnett River, Queensland, 1922* b&w photograph; 21.1 x 16.1 cm Pictures Collection nla.pic-vn3124459

