

# Paradise Parrot

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It has been over 60 years since the last Paradise Parrot (*Psephotus pulcherrimus*) was seen in the world – officially, that is. There have been numerous rumours of sightings, of people keeping them in aviaries and even of their illegal exportation, yet the fact remains that there has not been a single confirmed sighting since 1927. The lack of confirmed sightings has led to the widespread opinion that the Paradise Parrot is extinct. But extinction is difficult to prove. Several ‘presumed extinct’ Australian birds have been rediscovered, some comparatively recently: the Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*) and the Noisy Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) are two that come to mind. It is just possible that a small, remnant population of Paradise Parrots may survive in a remote area.

In the past this species was not so rare. From the late 1840’s to the 1880’s these birds were often seen, mostly as pairs but sometimes in small groups, within their accepted range. When nesting these birds excavated a tunnel, opening into a nesting chamber, usually in a termite mound. The Golden-shouldered Parrot (*P. Chrysopterygius*) and Hooded Parrot (*P. Dissimilis*) are the only other parrots to excavate a nest in termite mounds. In country where no termite mounds existed, there are records of Paradise Parrots tunnelling into the steep banks of creeks; they are even said to have resorted to

hollow tree stumps.

The *accepted* former distribution of this parrot is encompassed by the New South Wales towns of Casino and Inverell in the south, and, into Queensland, the Balonne and Cogoon Rivers to the west, the town of Roma to the north-west, and the city of Rockhampton to the north. They were once plentiful in the Brisbane River area, along the headwaters of the Dawson River, and on the Darling Downs. The first specimen was discovered in the Darling Downs in 1844 by John Gilbert – an experienced bushman and naturalist employed by that famous ‘Bird Man’ and publisher John Gould to collect specimens of natural history.

Soon after sending the first Paradise Parrot specimen to Gould, Gilbert joined the Leichhardt Expedition, which was attempting to reach Port Essington, near the present city of Darwin. The expedition left the then remote outpost of Jimbour, near Dalby, in October 1844. Gilbert regularly recorded further sightings of the Paradise Parrot until they reached the region of the present town of Rolleston. All these sightings were within the accepted range. Several months later on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1845, when the expedition was not far from the junction of the Mitchell and Lynd Rivers, Gilbert wrote: “I was rather surprised today to meet with my new *platycercus* of the Downs [Paradise Parrot], a species which has not been observed since leaving... Comet Creek.” Gilbert continued to record sightings of the Paradise Parrot. His final reference appeared on the 24<sup>th</sup>, when the party was 100 kilometres from the Gulf: “The new *Platycercus* I saw in great

numbers.”

Gilbert’s sightings along the Mitchell River have created controversy for years. Some accept them; the majority do not. The general attitude is that, as the similar Golden-shouldered Parrot is also found in this area, Gilbert mistook it for the Paradise Parrot. I find this hard to accept. In his letter to Gould, for instance, he used no less than 187 words just to describe the colouring of the Paradise Parrot. Gilbert knew what he was looking at.

Another viewpoint expressed is that it is unlikely to find two very similar birds with similar nesting habits in the same area. However, this practice does exist. The Eastern Rosella (*Platycercus eximius*) and the very similar Pale-headed Rosella (*P. Adscitus*), for example, can be found together in the coastal border country of New South Wales and Queensland. Besides this, we have the record of an observer who has seen both the Paradise Parrot and the Golden-shouldered Parrot on Cape York Peninsula.

In 1918, the Paradise Parrot was, as it is now, feared extinct. A naturalist and author of the time, Alec Chisholm, undertook an exhaustive search for it. He was eventually successful. Of all the reports he received, one is especially interesting. It came from Coen, Cape York Peninsula, where a police constable stated: “It was moderately plentiful at a certain point... of the Archer River... I have also seen the Golden-shouldered Parrot, and it is similar in habits to the Scarlet-shouldered [Paradise Parrot], *but not so plentiful*. [my

emphasis]

A third piece of evidence was found when looking at a copy of the book *What Bird is That?* (1984), illustrated with the famous Caley paintings. The attractively coloured male Paradise Parrot shown in this book was painted with the aid of a specimen held in the Australian Museum. Further checking revealed it was collected in 1894 at Cairns, northern Queensland. Currently, the data concerning this specimen is not considered absolutely reliable, but it cannot be ignored. Further investigations will clarify its accuracy.

These three pieces of evidence when viewed together suggest strongly the existence, at least in the past, of a northern population of Paradise Parrots.

We still do not fully understand why this attractive bird declined so markedly that its extinction is likely. Heavy trapping pressure to satisfy the lucrative European demand of the time is just one factor. In the late 1800's, individuals clamoured to obtain live specimens of the new wildlife being discovered in Australia. Of the birds, the brightly coloured parrots were the most sought after, and of the parrots, the Paradise Parrot received the most acclaim. As one enthusiast of the time, W. T. Green, wrote: "No-one can see it without desiring to possess so beautiful and graceful a bird, and large sums are being paid for handsome specimens."

Today, the search goes on to find this elusive bird. A private

expedition was mounted in 1988 to check rumours of sightings near the New South Wales – Queensland border. It was unsuccessful but another is planned. If a small remnant population is found, it is likely to be in a remote, sparsely populated area covered with plains of seeding grasses and dotted with termite mounds. There are parts of Cape York Peninsula that match this description completely. Unfortunately, of all the searches being planned, none will operate on the Cape.