

Book review

NIGHT PARROT

By Penny Olsen

2018. Published by CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, Victoria.

Paperback. \$49.99. ISBN 9781486302987

Scientifically-named in 1861 from a specimen collected in 1854 in Western Australia and with additional specimens collected in South Australia in 1867 and the 1870s, the Northern Territory in the 1890s, and Queensland in 1990, *Pezoporus occidentalis* has subsequently achieved legendary status – an attribute shared with Lasseter's lost gold reef and the status of the thylacine in Tasmania since 1940. Seeking fame and glory in 'rediscovering' the parrot has motivated many enthusiastic amateurs, naturalists, and scientists to search for it, and this has resulted in a mixed bag of records. Most are unreliable and seem based on wishful thinking, misidentification of other parrot species, or even deception. It was not until the 1990s that specimens were again found, thus indicating that the species was by no means extinct.

The author, well known for her meticulous delving into archival sources, has performed an important task in ferreting out records of, and references to, night parrots during the past 150 years. Her effective use of the Trove website of Australian newspapers is commendable.

Despite her impeccable research skills, the book falls down in its organisation and presentation. These weaknesses are many and are itemised below:

1. There is no timeline provided as an introduction to the significant events that have contributed to our knowledge of the night parrot. This would have assisted readers to navigate the book.
2. The book is structured in a parochial and artificial way, by jurisdiction, instead of chronologically. This has resulted in some unnecessary repetition.
3. A tabulation of aboriginal names of the night parrot with a clearer judgment as to which are genuine would have been more useful than the confusing account on pp. 12–15.
4. Too much irrelevant information is included. Such padding distracts from the focus of the book and at times makes for wearisome reading. Much of the particulars about the lives and contributions of nineteenth century collectors would have been better placed elsewhere (such as in Volume 4 of *Contributions to the History of Australasian Ornithology*). Also, it is ill-judged to recount a criminal offence committed in Britain by a prominent ornithologist, who subsequently migrated to Australia and lived a blameless life there.
5. Literary allusions to the night parrot are welcome but are placed haphazardly throughout the book and thereby lack cohesion. These should have been dealt with in a dedicated chapter, which would have provided opportunities to contrast literary treatments of another 'holy grail' species (thylacine) and other iconic Australian species.
6. Comparing and contrasting the research and collecting methods of the early naturalists and later scientists would have produced a useful chapter. The advances provided by molecular technology and remote cameras and acoustic devices could then have been treated in more detail. Introduction of philosophical issues about observation (as, for example, discussed by N.R. Hanson in his book *Patterns of Discovery*) would have added depth to the analysis.
7. This book is an 'armchair' study. The author has not visited the sites definitely known to have supported a population of night parrots but has instead relied on the site-specific description provided by others (the one supplied by Peter Curry is excellent). This, however, is no substitute for firsthand experience in comparing and contrasting the habitat at all sites where specimens were collected. This approach may have illuminated the essential habitat components (in terms of structural and floristic characteristics) beneficial to the species.
8. The system of referencing leaves much to be desired. Normally a book of this genre would include a single list of references, with endnotes used to provide less important and pertinent information that would have interrupted the narrative of the book. Instead, titles (often lengthy) of reference works are unnecessarily repeated *ad nauseam* (e.g. p. 89 – Sturt 1849, Forshaw *et al.* 1976; p. 149 – Austin 1855; p. 226 – North 1896, McEvey 1983).
9. The section on Queensland contains much new information, based on careful study of populations discovered in the last 5 years. This section would have benefited from a more condensed and concise presentation, guided by a sharp-eyed editor.
10. The book should have concluded with an overview of what is known about the biology of the night parrot (perhaps presented mostly in tabular format), together with an assessment of the species' ecology in terms of climate, fire, habitat, and disease contextualised in an interpretive framework. For example, Aboriginal people in the arid regions for many millennia deployed patch burning to acquire their food, and this system of land management resulted in mosaics of 'oldgrowth' (10+ years) and recently burnt vegetation. These burning practices largely ceased in the 1950s with the displacement of Aborigines. Why is it, then, that night parrots have survived the consequential shift to larger-scale (unmanaged) wildfires? Discussion about habitat changes caused by overstocking of cattle and sheep and the role of feral predators (cats, foxes) would have been useful, as would consideration of the possible role of diseases introduced to the arid region by the keeping of poultry in towns or on pastoral stations. Perhaps the safest conclusion to be drawn at present about this elusive species is 'always present, hard to find, more often overlooked'.

Ian Abbott

Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions, Perth, WA, Australia