

## Paradise lost

### *Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parrakeet*

**Penny Olsen**

[26213] Olsen, Penny. *Glimpses of paradise: the quest for the beautiful parrakeet*. Canberra: 2007. AU\$35.00

Reviewed by **Andrew Stafford**

THE BEAUTIFUL PARRAKEET was the name ornithologist John Gould originally bestowed upon what would become the first – and so far, only – Australian bird to have gone the way of the dodo since European settlement. The paradise parrot, as the bird became better known, was first described by Gould's protégé John Gilbert in 1844, and its story, as told in *Glimpses of Paradise* by Penny Olsen, is sad indeed.

The extinction of the paradise parrot is a topic of enduring fascination in Queensland, for the species was unique to the south-east region of the state, notwithstanding erroneous historical claims from the Cape York region and from the north-east of New South Wales. It was even locally common in parts of Brisbane, with sightings reported from the inner suburbs of Kelvin Grove and Bowen Hills.

Furthermore, as Gould and Gilbert noted, it was a fabulously beautiful bird, with the male's turquoise cheeks and breast, handsome black cap, and scarlet abdomen and shoulder patches. Such beauty made the parrot a magnet for collectors, who hastened its demise. The last confirmed sightings were made in the 1920s. Yet, like the Tasmanian tiger, rumours of its continued existence persist to the present day.

Olsen's finely detailed and beautifully presented book serves to finally give those rumours – and with them, the parrot itself – a dignified burial. It's an obvious but appropriate touch that John Cleese's famous soliloquy in honour of his dead "Norwegian blue" is reprinted as an epigraph. Bereft of life it rests; if it weren't nailed to the perch, it'd be pushing up the daisies.

Unscrupulous collectors were not the only ones to blame for the paradise parrot's loss. The bird belonged to a trio of endemic Australian species known as anthill parrots, so

named for their habit of excavating nesting burrows inside termite mounds. Human exploitation of these termitaria for use as flooring and, later, antbed tennis courts (on which Pat Rafter famously learnt his craft) was a devastating blow.

So, too, were the immense changes to the landscape wrought by white settlement: overgrazing, land-clearing and changes in fire regimes all took their toll. In the end, the terrible Federation drought at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all but finished the parrot off. Cyril Henry Jerrard obtained the only photographs of the species in the wild in 1922, near Gayndah in the Burnett; he last saw the bird in 1927.

Since then, we have only a passing parade of anecdotes, myths and occasional scams, which Olsen straightforwardly debunks one by one. A cast of characters – some noble, some odd and some criminal – is revealed, including a former head of Sydney's Taronga Park Zoo who bizarrely claimed to have recreated the paradise parrot through the interbreeding of other species.

More recent episodes include former environment minister Pat Comben's fruitless early 1990s search of the Dawson Valley, after a student claimed the birds were regular visitors to the front lawn of a local station homestead, and even an attempt to find a particular species of moth said to depend on the droppings left in nesting burrows: if the moth survived, it was reasoned, so must the parrot.

Olsen reserves particular scorn for self-described "wildlife detective" John Young, who last November caused an uproar when he presented photographs – later found to be highly dubious – of a new form of fig-parrot he claimed to have discovered in south-east Queensland. Young, it transpires, is a repeat offender, having made similarly unsubstantiated claims of nesting paradise parrots in the 1970s.

Worse, Olsen quotes a letter from Young to a colleague in which he boasted of collecting no less than five sets of five paradise parrot eggs and another set of six from a secret location. "Thirty-one eggs in all," writes Olsen with commendable restraint, "from a parrot on the edge of extinction!" The claim is surely rubbish; were it true, Young should be in prison.

Meticulous in its research and final in its conclusions, *Glimpses of Paradise* is a vital contribution to Australia's natural history literature. It's also a damning indictment of Queensland's frontier past, when one of our most exquisite living creatures was, in the space of a few decades, purged from the landscape: a victim, zoologist Richard Semon wrote in 1891, of the power of man.

*A lifelong birder, Andrew Stafford is the author of Pig City.*