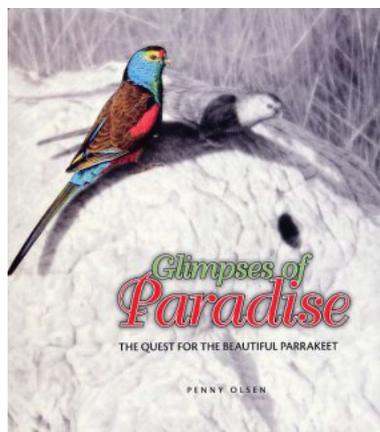


BOOK REVIEW



Glimpses of Paradise: The Quest for the Beautiful Parakeet

Penny Olsen. 2007. National Library of Australia, Canberra. Paperback, 259 pages, colour and black and white illustrations. ISBN 9780642276520. RRP \$35.00.

The Paradise Parrot *Psephotus pulcherrimus* holds an unique if unenviable place in the history of Australian ornithology: it is the only bird to have become extinct since European settlement (unlike the mammals with a world record number of species vanishing by the early twentieth century). However, even this tragic status remains contested, with apparent sightings continuing to the present day. A genuine mythology developed around the Paradise Parrot, attracting almost Thylacine-like fanaticism and misty conspiracies. As Olsen deftly explains, this is a story abounding in fanatics and champions, crusaders and charlatans. To this day, rumours of ultra-secret breeding aviaries, Government-sponsored expeditions to protected locations and even cloning laboratories continue to swirl and eddy whenever the topic of the species is murmured.

Author Penny Olsen has stated that she was only vaguely aware of this startling background when she first started to consider attempting to piece together the natural and social history of the Paradise Parrot. Apparently growing from a suggestion by noted natural history bookman Andrew Isles, the original plan for a 'straight forward' story about an extinct parrot rapidly grew wings, becoming far more detailed – and interesting – than the author could possibly have predicted. Yet the abundance of mysteries, intrigues and out-right deceptions Olsen unearthed are almost in inverse proportion to the amount of factual information available concerning the bird itself. This relationship between facts (few) and conjecture (seemingly endless) is both the strength and weakness of this book: a lot of time is spent on the background of factual minutiae, an approach almost inevitable given the meagre information available. Thankfully, for any historically inclined ornithologist, this process can be truly illuminating. Numerous famous names – John Gould, John Gilbert, Alec Chisholm, Mervyn Goddard and Sir Edward Hallstrom, for example – play important and sometimes unifying roles in the story. Indeed, it goes without saying that the portraits painted of some of the key players are far from complimentary.

For those willing to take the full tour, however, the depth and breadth of Olsen's detective work is nothing less than astonishing. Somehow she has found a bewildering array of tiny clues, comments and claims in forgotten letters, overlooked articles and endless dusty documents unearthed in plenty of proverbial cardboard boxes. She has also made personal contact with virtually everyone with the remotest connection to the story, including

surviving relations of key historical characters, some of whom may be less than pleased with the results. My own minor connection concerned one of the more recent claims of 'rediscovery'. In the early 1990s, a student I knew to be from the inland of central Queensland approached me with news that he had sighted 'a really rare parrot' at a site near his family property in the Dawson Valley. His verbal description suggested that this may indeed be a Paradise Parrot, and the location was certainly appropriate. The student was an accomplished natural historian, and his information was plausible enough for me to encourage his compilation of all the details he could glean. This led to his own attempt at a literature review of the subject, concluding with a research seminar (possibly the first undergraduate talk to be attended by a State Government Minister and entourage). From this time on, I lost all contact with the student, but learned from *Glimpses of Paradise* that a series of top-secret Queensland Government-sponsored expeditions were undertaken into the area, featuring a who's-who of Brisbane's ornithologists. But, yet again, the efforts led to nought, as had so many other apparent re-sightings.

Glimpses of Paradise is a genuinely unique book. More social history than biological, it is certainly the most detailed account of a minor but entirely fascinating strand of the historical development of ornithology in Australia. It is, in the main, clearly and nicely written, though the sequence of events is often bewilderingly illogical, or at least, opaque. It is also among the most beautifully designed, illustrated and produced Australian bird books of recent times, matched only by Olsen's early works (especially *Feather and Brush* 2001). She has found and reproduced every known specimen, painting and photograph of the Paradise Parrot (most of which are included in the book). Furthermore, Bill Cooper has produced a new - and luminous - portrait of the bird for the Frontispiece. The complete package seriously raises the production standards for Australian natural history publishing; the author and her unlikely publisher, the National Library of Australia, deserve high praise for their courage and vision. (NLA also hosts a segment on their website [www.nla.gov.au/pub/paradiseparrot/] devoted to additional relevant materials).

Not unexpectedly, the standard of editorial care and design are exemplary throughout. Nonetheless, such obvious and critical attention to the text did not prevent Olsen from making some strong judgements on the role of several key players in this drama, or possibly, farce. Given the detail provided by her detective work, most of the critical assessments seem fair and reasonable (especially in the cases of Florence Irby and the remarkably story of Sir Edward Hallstrom). This is not the case with Olsen's treatment of Alec Chisholm, however. At almost every mention of his involvement, Olsen seems almost obsessed with portraying Chisholm as manipulative, vindictive and maniacally egotistical. Regardless of the veracity of such claims, the seemingly endless negativity associated with the many Chisholm references becomes almost embarrassingly personal. This is one of very few weaknesses I found in an otherwise flawless and historically impressive work.

The appearance of *Glimpses of Paradise* is an all too rare event for Australian ornithology: a brilliant and beautiful volume, carefully designed and thoughtfully written. For once, the concept of *outstanding quality* seems entirely appropriate.

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