

## THE ELUSIVE NIGHT PARROT

Few birds excite more interest among professional ornithologists and amateur birdwatchers alike than the highly elusive night parrot.

The night parrot (*Pezoporus occidentalis*) is listed as a threatened species in Western Australia under the Wildlife Conservation Act. A recently developed procedure for ranking threatened species suggests that the night parrot should be ranked as 'critically endangered' and probably given the highest priority for recovery action of any Western Australian bird—if only we knew enough about its distribution, movements and ecology to produce such a plan!

*Though less bulky, the budgerigar has similar colouring to the night parrot.*



Before the turn of the century, many reports—but only 23 specimens—came from a vast arid area of Australia, with records from every mainland State. There seems little doubt that the bird has undergone a considerable decline in numbers and/or range since then. Nevertheless, there have been a number of reported sightings this century, of varying credibility, including 38 from Western Australia.

Historically, collected specimens and most sight

The night parrot. *Based on W. T. Cooper's illustration of the Night Parrot on p.125 of Derrick Ovington's Australian Endangered Species (Cassell Australia, 1978).*



records have come from four large but widely separated areas, including central Western Australia, especially the north eastern Gascoyne and along the Canning Stock Route. The late Dr Glenn Storr, a former WA Museum curator of birds, also recorded several unconfirmed sightings from arid parts of the Kimberley.

The first definite record for 80 years was a roadkilled specimen collected near Boulia in northwestern Queensland in 1990.

Coincidentally, there had been a growing number of unconfirmed reports over the last fifteen years or so—mainly from people driving at night—from the Mount Isa-Cloncurry region inland of the Gulf of Carpentaria, about 150 km north of Boulia.

A recent paper in the journal *Emu* describes seven separate sightings of night parrots in a relatively small area of the Mount Isa uplands south of Cloncurry, between March 1992 and June 1993. Most observations were at sites which had combinations of gravelly surfaces, dense, mature spinifex (*Triodia* spp.)

nearby, and water, accessible within a kilometre or so.

It has been assumed that the night parrot is a highly nomadic species, moving widely about the arid zone to find suitable habitat. It has also been suggested that there may be a more or less seasonal movement from spinifex grasslands, once the seed resource is depleted, to the samphire flats of salt lakes. Because of the assumption of nomadism, it has also been assumed that it would be extremely difficult to develop management plans for the species.

The types of habitats in which night parrots have been recorded appear to be widespread across arid Australia. Nevertheless, in the light of the comparative concentration

of historical sightings, and the many recent reports over several years from a quite restricted area of north-western Queensland, it seems possible that the night parrot may have key areas (or refuges in dry periods) on which its populations depend. It is on such key areas that any necessary management, such as predator control, should be concentrated.

A reading of both very old and very new literature on the night parrot suggests that one cannot rely solely on being in the right place at the right time for a chance sighting of the species. This is a small, secretive bird, coloured for concealment, which appears to be genuinely nocturnal, hiding almost totally in either dense spinifex or samphire



*Like the night parrot, the elegant parrot feeds on the ground, but does so during the day.*

during the daylight hours. Thus, deliberate searching, especially by spotlight at night, is likely to be needed if attempting to determine whether or not the night parrot occurs in a particular area. Daytime sightings have almost always involved birds flushed from spinifex or samphire, by chance or deliberately, through a beating process.

A logical first step towards developing a recovery plan for the night parrot in Western Australia would be to concentrate our enquiries and search efforts on those areas which appear to have the right combination of habitat features and which are in the same general area as historical sightings. A good starting point would be the north-east Gascoyne and adjacent areas, inland to the proposed Carnarvon Range National

Park and areas south and south-west of it, down to Lakes Nabberu, King and Gregory.

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) is about to take preliminary steps towards finding out whether, and if so where, populations of night parrots exist in Western Australia. Full-colour posters and brochures, showing the difference between the night parrot and the similarly-sized Bourke's parrot, which is also fairly active at night, are to be produced for distribution at truckstops—especially along the Great Northern Highway—and circulated to pastoralists in the Gascoyne region, four-wheel drive clubs, kangaroo shooters, and anyone else likely to be moving around in the rangelands at night.

Sightings reported as a

result of this publicity will be assessed and discussed with the people involved. If a significant number of apparently reliable reports come from the same or adjacent localities, and if the

country meets the habitat needs of night parrots, the next step would be an expedition to search systematically for them.

Given the special mystique of the night parrot, it should be easy to assemble a team of keen and experienced birdwatchers to help in the search!



*Bourke's parrot is fairly active at night but has totally different colouring.*

*Illustrations by Judith Blyth*

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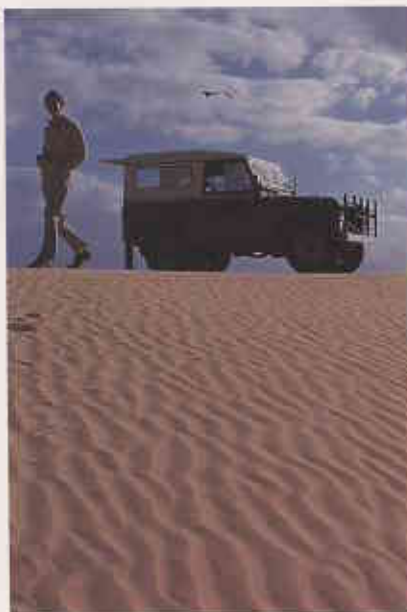
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# LANDSCOPE

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Cooperation between 4WD clubs and CALM is helping to protect WA's special recreation spots through a program of education. See 'Go Lightly' on page 17.



The noisy scrub-bird is one species that is responding well to its recovery plan. 'Recovering from the Brink' (page 10) discusses how such plans are drawn up.



Mt Augustus is the biggest rock in the world; yet few people know it exists. Find out more about this natural wonder on page 28.



There is a great deal written and talked about our forests. But what are the facts? 'Looking Beyond the Obvious' (page 22) dispels some of the myths.



Specially developed computer software is helping speed the identification of plant species in 'The Smart Collection' (page 49).

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The rainbow bee-eater is a common bird found throughout most parts of the State, including Mt Augustus National Park.

Illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky.



**Managing Editor:** Ron Kawalilik  
**Editor:** David Gough  
**Contributing Editors:** Verna Costello, Penny Walsh, Mandy Clews, Amanda Curtin, Deborah Mayrhofer  
**Scientific/technical advice:** Andrew Burbidge, Ian Abbott, Paul Jones, Tony Start  
**Design and production:** Maria Duthie, Sue Marais  
**Finished art:** Maria Duthie, Sue Marais  
**Illustration:** Gooitzen van der Meer, Ian Dickinson  
**Cartography:** Promaco Geodraft  
**Marketing:** Estelle de San Miguel ☎ (09) 334 0296 Fax: 334 0489  
**Subscription enquiries:** ☎ (09) 334 0481  
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