

Another Recent Specimen of the Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* from Western Queensland

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Summary. A headless specimen of the Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* was found under a barbed-wire fence in Diamantina National Park, western Queensland, in September 2006. The habitat in the vicinity was a low rise of bare gibber with patches of sparse, low shrubs and grasses, near a slight drainage depression lined with low Gidgee *Acacia cambagei*, but the Parrot may have been commuting to or from distant water when it struck the fence.

The last specimen, and confirmed record, of the Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* was a road-kill from near Boulia in south-western Queensland in 1990 (Boles *et al.* 1991, 1994). The species is listed as endangered nationally, and in all mainland Australian States and the Northern Territory. As detailed by Stafford (2007), one of us (RC) found another specimen, in Diamantina National Park, on 17 September 2006.

The Parrot's headless body was lying beside a barbed-wire fence, on which some of its feathers were caught; the body had been there for many days or even weeks, as it was desiccated and had little odour. Photographs of the specimen (taken by SC) were sent to Andrew Ley, who referred them to Stephen Debus (Zoology, University of New England) and Wayne Longmore (Museum Victoria), then reported back with confirmation that it was indeed a Night Parrot. From the similar Ground Parrot *P. wallicus* it differed by its shorter, more pointed wing-tips (p10 longest) without emarginated primaries, and its short, stubby claws (W. Longmore pers. comm.; see Higgins 1999 and Figure 1 herein). The specimen (Plate 10) was then lodged with the Queensland Museum in Brisbane; we leave it to the Queensland Museum team to provide further details in a separate publication.

The habitat in the vicinity of the Parrot find was a low rise of bare gibber with small, scattered patches of grasses including lovegrass *Eragrostis* sp., Katoora *Sporobolus actinocladius* and bottlewashers *Enneapogon* sp., and low shrubs including Blunt-leaf Punty-bush *Senna artemisioides* var. *helmsii*, Crimson Turkey-bush *Eremophila latrobei*, foxtail *Ptilotus* sp., sida *Sida* sp., and chenopods (copperburr *Sclerolaena* sp., bluebush *Maireana* sp.), with stands of low Gidgee *Acacia cambagei* trees along a slight drainage depression (Plates 11–13), and spinifex *Triodia* sp. 4 km away. However, the Parrot may have been commuting several kilometres to or from a water source; surface water was available 7 km away.

The Parrot was one of many local, mostly nocturnal, species found dead on or under barbed-wire fences in the Park (see Ley & Tynan 2008). Along with other recent records, this find provides additional support for interpreting the Night Parrot's distribution as including a core population in arid western Queensland (e.g. Garnett *et al.* 1993; Higgins 1999). It also highlights the danger posed to birds, including rare or threatened species, by the many kilometres of barbed wire traversing the landscape: an animal-cruelty as well as a conservation issue (see Booth 2007). The dead Night Parrot at Diamantina suggests that conservation



**Headless dead Night Parrot, Diamantina National Park, Qld, September 2006:
victim of barbed-wire fence**

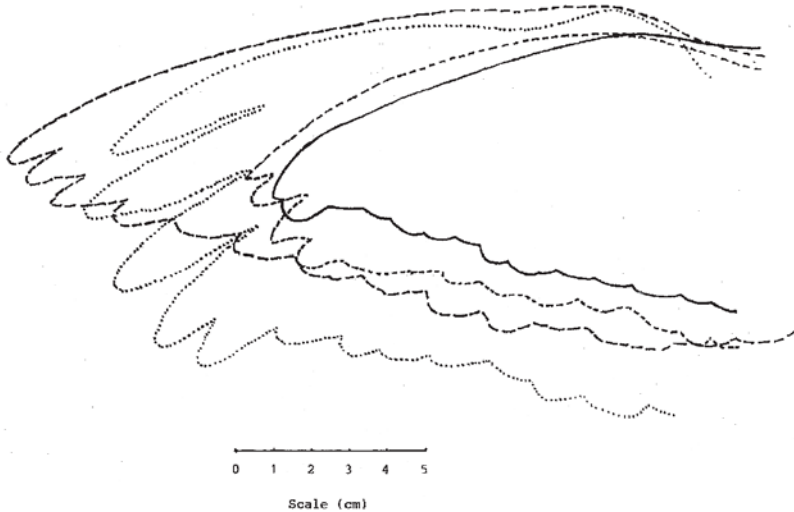


Figure 1. Comparative shapes of the spread wings of four Australian parrots: Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* (solid line), Ground Parrot *P. wallicus* (short dash), Pale-headed Rosella *Platycercus adscitus* (dots), and Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus* (dash), showing the much shorter outerwings of the Ground and Night Parrots.

Sketch: Wayne Longmore (Museum Victoria)

management should include removal of internal fencing in conservation reserves (other than that essential for managing feral animals or over-abundant kangaroos at water sources), and that alternatives to barbed and thin (i.e. invisible) wire should be investigated. These strategies will require adequate resourcing.

Given the existence now of a reasonably fresh specimen of the Night Parrot, there is the opportunity to compare fresh DNA with that of the Ground Parrot, and thus re-examine the generic allocation of the former (cf. Courtney 1997a,b, who advocated retention of *Geopsittacus* for the Night Parrot on morphological and other grounds). The difference in wing-tip shape (more pointed in Night Parrot) suggests that the Night Parrot habitually flies more, and perhaps undertakes long-distance movements.

The circumstances surrounding the Boulia and Diamantina specimens, and the sightings reported by Garnett *et al.* (1993), suggest that Night Parrots might be located by watching and listening at waterholes from dusk, and mist-netting such sites (with appropriate large mesh-size) if there are birds coming to drink after dusk; slow spotlight-driving at night on tracks through potential habitat, for birds feeding on the ground; listening in potential habitat at dawn and dusk for possible calling behaviour analogous to that of the Ground Parrot (cf. Higgins 1999); and sound-recording of any calls for subsequent call-playback, to elicit a response. Systematic survey of fence-lines, roads and tracks in the arid zone would also locate carcasses of birds, including perhaps other Night Parrots, that strike fences or are struck by vehicles; the results of such surveys, for all species, should be documented.



Habitat around site of Night Parrot specimen, Diamantina National Park, Qld



Habitat around site of Night Parrot specimen, Diamantina National Park, Qld



**Ground-flora detail (chenopod shrubs and grasses) at site of Night Parrot specimen,
Diamantina National Park, Qld**

Plate 13

Photo: Brian Tynan

We thank Andrew Ley and Wayne Longmore for their assistance with identification of the specimen, and Editors Andrew Ley and Stephen Debus for assistance with the preparation of this note. Plant identifications were made by Maree Mostert of Queensland Parks & Wildlife Service, Longreach, Qld, and habitat photographs were supplied by Brian Tynan. We also thank Maree Mostert and an anonymous reviewer for comments on a draft, and Wayne Longmore for his sketch of parrot wings.

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Editors' note: This paper by Cuppit & Cuppit supplements the incomplete account by Stafford [2007, *Wingspan* 17(2), 12–13] and the commentary by Twyford [2007, *Wingspan* 17(4), 5], by providing further details on the initial events in the story. Although it is true that two members of Birds Australia (Northern NSW) were the first ornithologists to be notified of the find, we were asked to keep it confidential, and hence it cannot be claimed that Birds Australia as a body was officially notified at the time. The request for confidentiality was reasonable, and we were obliged to maintain that confidence, because it was the Qld Parks & Wildlife Service's specimen and their call. The secrecy was justified, because it would have done any living Night Parrots, and the habitat, no good to have enthusiasts descending *en masse* on an unstaffed park in a flood-prone desert in summer. The situation calls for well-planned, systematic survey and research, via collaboration between QPWS, Qld Museum, the Night Parrot Network and, hopefully, Birds Australia.

Stephen Debus and Andrew Ley

Notice—

Nomenclature of Birds

For English and scientific names of birds, and taxonomic sequence, *AFO* uses Christidis & Boles (2008), *Systematics and Taxonomy of Australian Birds*, CSIRO, Melbourne.

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