

## Historical article—

# Recollections of the last known authentic sightings of the Paradise Parrot

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**Summary.** Documented here are observations made by the last person living known to have seen living Paradise Parrots.

It is about three-quarters of a century since I saw a Paradise Parrot *Psephotus pulcherrimus*, but the memory is fresh and vivid. I was 12 years old when I saw my first Paradise Parrot, and 15 when I saw my last Parrot three years later, in 1938. At that age I was a keen student of natural history. We grew up in the bush, did not have radio (television did not exist then), and we knew what we were looking at. My family lived near Wallaville, 12 km south-west of Gin Gin in the Burnett River valley, south-eastern Queensland.

It was the era of the Depression when we moved there in 1931. At the time, most properties were one square mile (640 acres, or 260 ha), and stock routes were fenced by post and rail. Cattle were not common, as dairy was in its infancy, and beef cattle, though present, were also not common in the area.

In 1933, the flooding of Currajong Creek damaged fencing and washed away the sugarcane tram-rail bridge on a 230-ha property in the area, in the very paddock where we later saw the Paradise Parrots. The flood prompted the owner to sell the vacant (unused) land to a friend of my family. When the fencing was repaired (being the Depression, stock-proof fencing had to be installed), the new owner purchased some cattle and hired me and my father, Ernest, to manage them. Our job was to muster and dip the cattle (against cattle ticks), and during regular mustering forays on horseback we encountered the Parrots, which we always looked for. My father had said, 'They're those anthill parrots; they nest in termite mounds'.

It was just the one pair of Parrots each time we went out, and we always saw them. I remember the colours, the red flashing wings and the brownish back as the male took off in front of us. They were always on the ground, feeding, when we found them. Sometimes we went out dipping once a month, and they were there each time, at the far end of the property. The Parrots favoured short grasses in sparsely wooded country. They were not shy; we could approach to within about 10 metres of them before they flushed and flew off.

In 1938, my family and other workers were levelling termite mounds for the material that then formed the base for tennis courts. We hired a two-ton truck and dug up 13 loads of a dozen mounds each (or about 150 mounds for one tennis court). After lopping off the top of a mound, I found a chamber containing four eggs. We pondered the owner's identity, and I did not link the termite mound to the Parrots, or finally identify the species of parrot (by its official name) I and my father had been seeing, until I consulted a copy of A.J. Leach's field guide, *An Australian Bird Book* (Leach 1926). That was when we realised for certain what the birds were. The existence of the birds had been known to people in the area, but they were simply known locally as the 'anthill parrots'. At that time, we did not know that the Parrots were so rare.

I ceased working that cattle property at 15 (having to then work on a sugarcane farm at Wallaville), soon after discovering the egg-chamber, but my father continued to report the single pair of Paradise Parrots until 1940. The introduction of beef cattle, with its regime of burning off to promote green feed for stock and other changes to the land, I believe, sounded the death knell for the ground-feeding, mound-nesting Parrot.

Much later than these sightings, I became involved in searches for the lost parrot in the 1960s. In 1963, I spent many weekends camping out on my own. From these experiences, I concluded that the introduction of fire had made a vast change to the vegetation, compared with when I had observed the Paradise Parrot near Wallaville in the 1930s. Fire had greatly increased the regeneration of native species (e.g. shrubs, eucalypts and taller rank grasses) that were not present before the graziers' burning regime. Having visited Cape York Peninsula seven or eight times (including extended camp-outs of up to a month) between 1969 and 2004, I feel that the demise of the Paradise Parrot and its preferred habitat can be likened to the situation of the endangered Golden-shouldered Parrot *Psephotus chrysopterygius* and its habitat of today. Fire-induced vegetation thickening in Golden-shouldered Parrot habitat may well see that parrot's extinction also (see, for example, Crowley 2012).

On Manar Station I was shown the same termite mound where, in 1922, Cyril Jerrard took his historic photographs of the Paradise Parrot near the Burnett River (see Chisholm 1922). I searched this historic site and adjoining areas, including where I saw the Parrots as a teenager, but the search proved fruitless.

In 1974, after heavy flooding throughout parts of Queensland, I again revisited Manar and the historic mound photographed by Jerrard (who had opened the egg chamber to find the eggs addled), but it was, after 52 years, a collapsed structure. This progression raises the question of the age of that fully developed termitarium in 1922.

The above account is reprinted (here edited) from Greg Roberts's interview with Eric Zillmann, on Roberts's sunshinecoastbirds birding blog <<http://sunshinecoastbirds.blogspot.com.au/2011/07/paradise-parrot-and-eric-zillmann.html>>, with permission and grateful thanks, and supplemented with additional notes and corrections by the author. Thanks go also to Chris Barnes for helpful discussion.

## References

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**Editor's note:** This piece is published here for posterity, appearing as it does near the centenary of publication of the last authentic field account of the Paradise Parrot (Chisholm 1922). As Roberts notes in his blog:

Eric's sightings are acknowledged in Penny Olsen's seminal book on the Paradise Parrot, *Glimpses of Paradise – The Quest for the Beautiful Parrakeet* [Olsen 2007]. Eric has been awarded an OAM and an honorary tertiary degree for his services to natural history. His abilities in the field with birds and other wildlife—and his knowledge of natural history in the Wide Bay–Burnett region of Queensland—are legendary.

Eric, 89, is the only person alive known to have seen living Paradise Parrots, the many subsequent false or unverified claims notwithstanding. His notes add a little on the bird's ecology (e.g. see also Jerrard's notes, posthumously published in 2008; Debus 2008; Lendon 2008). Eric gained ornithological prominence through his knowledge of owls, quoted in David Fleay's *Nightwatchmen of Bush and Plain* (Fleay 1968), and his own paper (Zillmann 1964) on Barking Owls in the *Australian Bird Watcher* almost 50 years ago. As we approach the centenary of extinction of the Paradise Parrot, in the present century there are many more bird species facing extinction in Australia. Counting only mainland terrestrial species, there are now 19 assessed by Garnett *et al.* (2011) as either endangered or critically endangered. In the 'Land of Parrots', seven of these are parrots, some set to follow the Paradise Parrot imminently (see Garnett *et al.* 2011).

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