

## A 'new' Night Parrot specimen?

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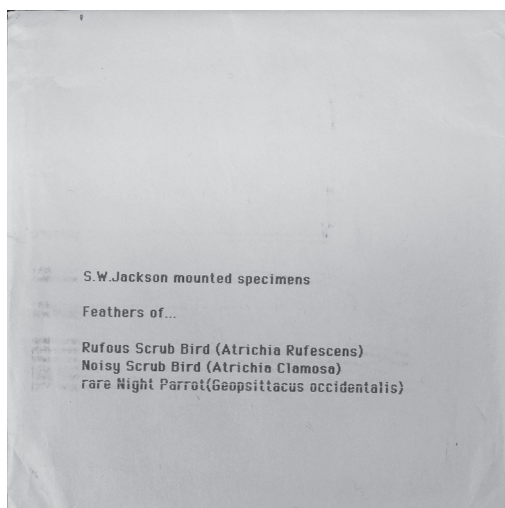
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**Summary.** Three lots of mounted feathers recently acquired by the Australian Museum represent the Rufous Scrub-bird *Atrichornis rufescens*, Noisy Scrub-bird *A. clamosus* and Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis*. These were originally in the possession of Sidney W. Jackson. Although the label accompanying the Night Parrot feathers attributes them to Richard Helms of the Horn Expedition to Central Australia in 1894, there are problems with this information, and Jackson may have removed the feathers from specimens while curating the H.L. White collection.

The Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* remains one of Australia's most enigmatic avian species. The intriguing history of this bird was well presented by Olsen (2009). When Forshaw *et al.* (1976) surveyed all the known specimens in world museums, they reported only 23, not all of which were still in existence, to which Black (2012) added three previously unreported specimens. Two further specimens have been found in recent decades: a road-killed bird in 1990 (Boles *et al.* 1994) and a fence casualty in 2006 (Cupitt & Cupitt 2008; McDougall *et al.* 2009). In addition to specimens, there has been a low but regular frequency of observational reports (e.g. Garnett *et al.* 1993; Davis & Metcalf 2008), which, until recently, have not been corroborated by photographs or other physical support. In July 2013, it was widely announced in newspapers (e.g. *The Australian*, 4 July 2013) and online (e.g. *ABC News*, 3 July 2013) that a live Night Parrot had been observed and photographed by naturalist John Young in south-western Queensland. A photograph accompanied the original story in *The Australian* and has since appeared in other publications (e.g. Dooley 2013) and video footage was first presented at an event at Queensland Museum on 3 July 2013 and on occasions since. Although summaries of this find have been presented by Dooley (2013) and Murphy (2013), full details have not yet been made generally available.

One of the most intriguing early reports is that of George Keartland, a naturalist on the Horn Expedition led by Walter Baldwin Spencer to Central Australia in May–August 1894. Keartland's notes, reported by A.J. North (1896), include the statement, 'In addition to the birds shot or noted on our journey, I was shown a small collection of skins, or fragments of skins which had been killed near the Alice Springs telegraph station. In one of the operators' rooms several picture frames were covered with wings and tails of the porcupine parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*) which had been caught by a cat last summer' (Keartland in North 1896, pp. 110–111). The Horn Expedition did not otherwise encounter the Night Parrot and none of the remains was recorded as having been acquired.



**Figure 1.** Folded A4 manila envelope as received by Australian Museum, showing label on front.

This note reports and discusses the hypothetical history of Night Parrot material recently acquired by the Australian Museum that was not included among specimens cited by Forshaw *et al.* (1976) and Black (2012). Accompanying information suggests that it may relate to the observations of Keartland; however, difficulties with this theory are identified and a more likely source is proposed.

Annually, the University of New South Wales holds a book fair at which books donated by the public and from other sources are sold. In 2011, Ruth Foster, who was sorting donated materials, came across a non-book item, which she passed to the Australian Museum Research Library on 15 March of that year. This item had been donated to the Book Fair anonymously and lacked any information regarding its recent previous provenance. It was subsequently forwarded to the Bird Section of the Museum. It comprised a folded A4 manila envelope (Figure 1) with the typed label [*sic*]:

S.W. Jackson mounted specimens

Feathers of...

Rufous Scrub Bird (*Atrichia Rufescens*)

Noisy Scrub Bird (*Atrichia Clamosa*)

rare Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*)

The envelope contained three small cardboard plaques (135 mm × 135 mm), a comparably sized photograph and the end panel of a cardboard box. The cardboard plaques each have feathers attached on the obverse, with a handwritten (script) legend on the reverse. All are dated 27 June 1915, apparently when the plaques were prepared. The first (Figure 2) has two dishevelled feathers, with the caption [*sic*]:



Two tail feathers of the rare & almost extinct Rufous Scrub Bird (*Atrichornis rufescens*), once found plentiful in the dense scrubs of the Richmond, Tweed, Clarence, & Bellenger River scrubs of the N.E. New South Wales. These 2 tail feathers are from a male specimen collected in the Dorrigo scrubs of the Bellenger River district, New S. Wales during October of 1898 by Sid. Wm Jackson & Frank T.A. Jackson.

27.6.1915

**Figure 2.** Plaque with two tail-feathers of Rufous Scrub-bird *Atrichornis rufescens* and associated information: (left) obverse and (right) reverse.



Tail feather of the rare & supposed extinct Noisy Scrub Bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*), once found frequenting the dense coastal scrubs of the South-West corner of West Australia. This feather is from a male specimen collected near Albany, S. West Australia in 1882.

27.6.1915

**Figure 3.** Plaque with tail-feather of Noisy Scrub-bird *Atrichornis clamosus* and associated information: (left) obverse and (right) reverse.



Three tail feathers of the rare & supposed extinct Night Parakeet (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*) Gld. Taken from a bird shot in South Australia in 1894.

Collected during the Horn Expedition into Central Australia, by Richard Selous one of the scientific staff.

27/6/1915.

{ Bird is known to the older aborigines about Alice Springs & Hermannsburg Mission Station as "Trunkopoltors" }

**Figure 4.** Plaque with feathers (two tail-feathers and uppertail-covert) of Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* and associated information: (left) obverse and (right) reverse.

Two tail feathers of the rare & almost extinct Rufous Scrub Bird (*Atrichia rufescens*), & once found plentiful <sup>(1890)</sup> in the dense scrubs of the Richmond, Tweed, Clarence, & Bellinger River scrubs of N.E. New South Wales. These 2 tail feathers are from a male specimen collected in the Dorriggo scrubs of the Bellinger River district, New S. Wales during October of 1898 by Sid Wm Jackson & Frank T.A. Jackson.

27.6.1915

The second (Figure 3) has a single feather. It reads [*sic*]:

Tail feather of the rare & supposed Extinct Noisy Scrub Bird (*Atrichia clamosa*), once found frequenting the dense coastal scrubs of the south- west corner of West Australia, this feather is from a male specimen collected near Albany, S. West Australia in 1882.

27.6.1915

The third plaque (Figure 4) has three feathers, (left to right) a right outer tail-feather (likely r5), an uppertail-covert and a left outer tail-feather (again, likely r5). Its label reads [*sic*]:

[inked] Three tail feathers of the rare & supposed Extinct Night Parrakeet (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*) Gld. Taken from a bird shot in South Australia in 1894.

[pencilled] Collected during the Horn Expedition into Central Australia, by Richard Helms, one of the scientific staff. [This entry appears to have been inserted subsequent to the original text. Although there are some differences from the other handwriting on the plaque, it looks like it is also that of Jackson. An examination by WEB of Jackson's papers in the National Library of Australia, Canberra, showed that there was considerable variation in his handwriting, even within a single document.]

[inked] 27/6/1915

{Bird is known to the older aborigines about Alice Springs & Hermannsburg Mission Station as — "Tnokkapaltara".}

[cursive initials] SWJ

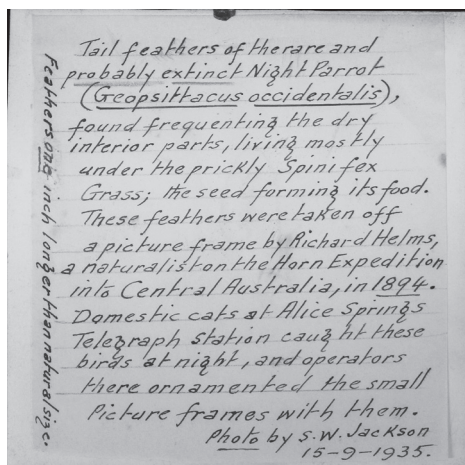
The photograph in the envelope was of this plaque. Its inscription (Figure 5) is printed, rather than written in script, again presumably in Jackson's hand, and the date given is 15 September 1935 [*sic*]:

Tail feathers of the rare and probably extinct Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*), found frequenting the dry interior parts, living mostly under the prickly Spinifex Grass; the seed forming its food. These feathers were taken off a picture frame by Richard Helms, a naturalist on the Horn Expedition into Central Australia, in 1894. Domestic cats at Alice Springs Telegraph Station caught these birds at night, and operators there ornamented the small Picture frames with them.

Photo by S.W. Jackson

15-9-1935

[along the left side] Feathers one inch longer than natural size. [The images are slightly larger than natural size, but not to the extent stated here.]



**Figure 5.** Writing on reverse of photograph of Night Parrot plaque.

The end panel of a cardboard box (Figure 6), presumably that in which the plaques and photograph were stored, has the following label, which is printed [sic]:

[inked] Tail feathers of rare

(?extinct) Night Parrot

(*Geopsittacus occidentalis*)

Collected Central Australia

1894.

native name

—“*Tnokkapaltara*”.

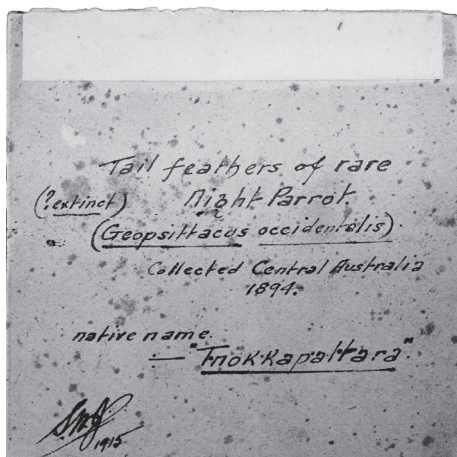
[cursive] SWJ

1915

Sidney William Jackson (1873–1946) was a collector and naturalist who, after building a substantial collection of eggs, sold these to Henry Luke (H.L.) White (1860–1927). White had developed the largest private bird collection in Australia and employed Jackson to curate this collection, held at White’s home ‘Belltrees’, near Scone, in the Upper Hunter Valley, NSW. The date written on the plaques, 1915, was during this period of employment (Whittell 1954; White 1991).

NWL considers the possibility that Jackson acquired both lots of scrub-bird feathers from the H.L. White [HLW] Collection, as these match up with specimens held in that collection in Museum Victoria. Jackson had collected a skin of the Rufous Scrub-bird (HLW.8540) while employed by White. This eventually went to Museum Victoria (Longmore 2012). The plaque with the Rufous Scrub-bird feathers has been registered in the Australian Museum Collection as O.73978. The Noisy Scrub-bird specimen in the White Collection (HLW. 2721) was collected





**Figure 6.** Writing on end panel of cardboard box.

by George Masters in King George Sound, Western Australia, in 1882, and subsequently acquired by White. The plaque has been registered as O.73979.

After Jackson left White's employment at 'Belltrees', he wandered about Sydney suburbs talking to school groups and others. These plaques would have been part of his 'show and tell'.

The H.L. White Collection has two skins of the Night Parrot (HLW.54–55), one an adult and the other a younger bird (Forshaw *et al.* 1976). Both were acquired from Robert Grant, who in turn possibly obtained them from Frederick W. Andrews, the noted collector of Night Parrots (see Olsen 2009). It seems likely that Jackson removed feathers from these birds in a similar fashion to those of the scrub-birds. The two tail-feathers have differences in patterning that suggest that they may have come from different birds. This plaque has been registered as Australian Museum O.73980.

Night Parrot specimens at the Australian Museum and Museum Victoria were examined by WEB and NWL, respectively. None of the Australian Museum birds was the likely source of the feathers, whereas the two Museum Victoria birds may have been. This deduction is difficult to prove conclusively, because of individual variation in patterns and other possible causes for the loss of tail-feathers.

Superficially, these tail-feathers appear to correspond with those noted by Kearland at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station. There are problems, however, with the association of Richard Helms with this specimen, despite the comments by Jackson.

Helms (1842–1914) was born in Germany, arriving in Australia in 1858 (Chisholm 1972). During his time in the country, he was employed in various roles, particularly as an entomologist and anthropologist. Helms was appointed naturalist on the Elder Exploring Expedition to Central Australia, May 1891–June 1892. He was not, however, a participant in the Horn Expedition nor did he visit

Alice Springs while on the Elder Expedition, which occurred several years earlier.

Jackson was always keen to emphasise his own ideas and efforts as well as adding bits of information, thus enhancing the story or exaggerating his own status (Chisholm 1958). This aspect is particularly evident in his additions to clutch records in the H.L. White oological catalogue (NWL pers. obs.). In the case of the Night Parrot feathers, such action appears to explain the pencilled additions to the information on the back of the plaque (Figure 4) and his remarks on the reverse of the photograph (Figure 5).

Further evidence of Jackson's propensity for playing with the truth comes from an article that he wrote in *The World's News* (9 October 1935) entitled 'Australian bird destruction by cats and other pests' (Jackson 1935). It was accompanied by an image of the Night Parrot's tail-feathers, presumably from the photograph shown in Figure 4. The Night Parrot was among the species discussed in the text, in which Jackson repeated his claim that Richard Helms was on the Horn Scientific Expedition and that he had seen feathers from cat-killed Night Parrots on the Telegraph Station's walls. He goes further, however, and stated that observation 'was reported to me by Mr. Richard Helms'.

On the box end panel, he wrote 'Native name — Tnokkapaltara' and gave a date of 1915. The indigenous name Tnokkapaltara is from the Arunta language of Central Australia. Whitlock (1924) cited this name in his paper on his search for the Night Parrot around the Hermannsburg area, Northern Territory, in 1922. In his account of this species, Whitlock (1924, p. 263) remarked that Tnokkapaltara was added in the margin next to an entry for the name 'Nacht-lichter papagei' in a 'recently published account of the folk-lore of the Arunta tribe, by the late Rev. C. Strehlow'. Carl Strehlow was a German Lutheran missionary and Superintendent of the Finke River Mission in Hermannsburg from 1894 to 1922. It is uncertain, but unlikely, that there are any citations of 'Tnokkapaltara' in the literature earlier than Whitlock (1924). It is thus highly doubtful that Jackson's date of 1915 is correct, and it is more probable that the label was 'back-dated' when it was written.

Unless there is proof that the Night Parrot feathers came via the Elder Expedition, the idea that they were obtained via Helms could be discarded. It seems more likely that Jackson simply obtained feathers from the skins he had at hand. However, this interpretation is not conclusive.

Another inconsistency is the discrepancy between the label on the Night Parrot feathers stating that they came from 'a bird shot in... 1894' and that on the photograph of the feathers, which says that they were 'taken off a picture frame'.

The provenance of the feathers, both for their possession by Jackson and subsequent appearance in the University of New South Wales Book Fair, remains a mystery, at least for now. The writing on the manila folder appears to have been done with an electric typewriter, which may give some time constraint for when it occurred. It is interesting that, although Jackson used the name *Atrichornis* on his handwritten labels, the typed (and presumably more recent) legend on the manila envelope used the older name, *Atrichia*, a name Jackson himself used in

his earlier publications (e.g. Jackson 1907). The significance of this difference is not clear. Hopefully, additional information will come to light to clarify the origin of these Night Parrot feathers.

## Acknowledgements

This discovery would not have been made if Ruth Foster (University of New South Wales) had not recognised the importance of the envelope and its contents and forwarded them to the Museum. Staff of the Australian Museum Research Library recorded relevant information upon their arrival and housed the specimens until they were transferred to the Bird Section. Staff of the National Library of Australia, Canberra, allowed WEB access to the S.W. Jackson papers in its collection. Dr Penny Olsen discussed the first appearance of the name *Tnokkapaltara*. Dr Andrew Black made available his then unpublished manuscript on early Night Parrot specimens. Finally, thanks must, of course, go to the anonymous donor.

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