

# AND ALONG CAME polly

## Australia's feathered phantom returns

For a hundred years the Night Parrot haunted Australia's ornithological community. The last verifiable – albeit brief – sighting of a live Night Parrot was in 1912, when an unfortunate individual was mistaken for a Bronze-wing Pigeon and shot by a hunter. Since then, the parrot's spectral presence in the vast interior of the continent has occasionally been confirmed through erratic chance encounters: a dead bird found by the roadside in 1990, a sighting (but no photographs) in 2005, another carcass in 2006. Most articles about the species include the words 'Holy Grail' somewhere in their text.

All that changed in July 2013, when naturalist John Young presented a stunned audience with photographs and a video clip of the parrot. These were no pixelated blurs reminiscent of the dubious rediscovery of North America's Ivory-billed Woodpecker, but crystal-clear close-ups of a Night Parrot hopping between spinifex plants.

That the bird in the photographs was *Pezoporus occidentalis* was undeniable. The footage was the culmination of years of fieldwork; Young reckons he drove 325 000 kilometres during his quest for the bird.

But a skeleton soon emerged from the cupboard. It concerned a photograph Young had presented to the media a few years previously that supposedly showed

a new species of fig-parrot, but which Young was subsequently accused of digitally manipulating. So initially the authenticity of the Night Parrot footage was not universally accepted. However, Young had also collected feathers from a roost site, and sent samples to a reputable DNA lab for analysis. The result: 100 per cent Night Parrot. Case closed, it would seem.

### YOUNG'S DECISION NOT TO RELEASE HIS RECORDINGS OF THE PARROT'S CALL HAS TRIGGERED HEATED DEBATE AMONG CONSER- VATIONISTS, BIRDERS AND SCIENTISTS ALIKE

Now the controversy has shifted from the evidence itself to the conservation of the species. The location of Young's sighting remains a closely-guarded secret and he has made it clear that he will not divulge the details to nature conservation authorities or anyone else. Most observers accept that this is probably a good thing; in the wrong hands, specifics of the location could bring about the rapid demise of this Night Parrot population.

On the other hand, Young's decision not to release his recordings of the parrot's call

has triggered heated debate among conservationists, birders and scientists alike. Young and his supporters maintain that multitudes of birders tramping around the Outback playing the call could cause serious disturbance for the remaining Night Parrots. Opponents of this view make the undoubtedly valid counter-argument that unless people know what the species actually sounds like there is little or no chance of detecting its presence in areas of potentially suitable habitat. So for the sake of learning about the parrot's ecology and preventing further habitat loss, they argue, it is critical that Young's recording be released.

What does the future hold for the species sometimes colloquially known as the Midnight Cockatoo? The fact that it has persisted below the radar for so long, despite the combined onslaughts of introduced predators and habitat loss, certainly allows for a modicum of optimism. Feral cats, which have decimated populations of indigenous mammals and birds across the length and breadth of Australia, are probably the single greatest threat faced by the species. Hopefully, however, coming years will see the discovery of more Night Parrot populations and the development of effective conservation strategies to secure the future of this enigmatic bird.

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