

THE NIGHT PARROT

by BRIAN POWELL

I am convinced that I have seen the Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*) on a number of occasions since arriving at Partacoona, about 20 miles north of Quorn, in South Australia in 1963. The birds have usually been flushed while mustering cattle on horseback about eight miles west of Neuroodla Railway Station. The birds when flushed would fly a short distance (approximately 50 yards) keeping very low to the ground, and on landing would quickly rush to cover. This area is covered with annual and perennial saltbush (*Atriplex* spp.), some bindii (*Bassia* sp.) and blackbush (*Kochia pyramidata*). There is no *Triodia* for several miles. The parrots were observed in this area on five occasions.

On August 15, 1969, a single bird was flushed while droving sheep from a different area about three miles north of Partacoona homestead. The ground here was mainly covered with the introduced Ward Weed (*Vella annua*), annual saltbush, bindii and spear grass (*Stipa* sp.) about 1 ft. 6 ins. high. The Ward Weed was in flower, and gave excellent cover to the bird which had a mottled appearance similar to the Ward Weed. On this occasion the bird was watched for about fifteen minutes and as close as 6 ft. The general colour was dark green with an overlay of the feathers giving it a mottled appearance. There was a yellow cheek patch and no red band on the forehead as in the Swamp Parrot (*Pezoporus wallicus*). There appeared to be dark

feathers along the edge of the wing. In size the bird was about the same as a Red-rumped parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*) or larger. It squatted very tightly to the ground and when disturbed darted from the bush very quickly, hugging the ground closely. It seemed to prefer to run for cover, rather than fly and would only fly when really pressed. At this time early August, the *Triodia* was only starting to run to head and so perhaps the bird was out of its usual habitat in search of other seed. There is quite a large area of *Triodia*, commencing two miles west of this site which could easily conceal quite a few Night Parrots.

This is by far the shyest bird I have ever seen and when hiding in suitable cover is almost impossible to find unless nearly trodden on. I have had a horse's hoof within two feet of the bird and a utility wheel about the same, and still the bird would only run.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

by J. B. PATON

Wilson⁽¹⁾ lists the skins of the Night Parrot known to exist of which 12 are from South Australia and 8 of these from the Gawler Ranges. These latter specimens were all collected between 1866 and 1888, and one bird believed by Matthews⁽²⁾ to be the one depicted in Gould's *Birds of Australia* was sent to the London Zoological Gardens in

1867 by Dr. F. von Mueller, where it lived for several months. The following note accompanied the bird — "This peculiar parrot was presented to me by Mr. Ryan on whose sheep station in the Gawler Ranges . . . it was obtained." Information from the Department of Lands showed that Charles Ryan and a Mr. Nicholson leased the station now known as Nonning from 1865-1868.

The period 1865-1885 has been the only time when the parrot was abundant and Forshaw⁽³⁾ believes this was due not so much to an increase in the population, as to a movement away from the interior associated with the commencement of pastoral activities (it is noteworthy that each of Mr. Powell's observations occurred during mustering). No reliable recordings of the Night Parrot appear to have been made in the Gawler Ranges since this period though many people have looked for it. H. T. Condon in his *Handlist of Birds of South Australia* (1968) considers that it is probably extinct in this State. Mr. Powell's observations are therefore of singular interest, particularly when it is realised that Partacoona is only about 100 miles from Nonning.

At the WEA Spring School held at Partacoona in September 1969 a group of about 25 volunteers systematically combed the area near where Mr. Powell saw the parrot some three weeks previously, but no bird was seen. However it seems possible that a Night Parrot was disturbed the previous night by E. N. Paton who was spot-lighting for quail (as part of the CSIRO banding project) a few hundred yards from this place. A parrot-shaped bird a little smaller than a rosella and greenish in colour was picked up by the headlights (not the spotlight). It flew very low and disappeared over a rise where it was not possible to follow it.

The property is well managed, and pending confirmation of Mr. Powell's identification, grazing may not pose any immediate threat to the continued survival of vulnerable ground birds. Identification could be confirmed by predator remains, moulted plumage, photographic evidence or specimen taken under the auspices of the Department of Fauna Conservation.

REFERENCES

1. WILSON, H. *Emu*, 37 (1937), 79.
2. MATTHEWS, G. M. *Birds of Australia* 6, p. 498.
3. FORSHAW, J. M. *Australian Parrots*, p. 294.