

Threatened Species of the Northern Territory

NIGHT PARROT

Pezoporus occidentalis

Conservation status

Australia: Endangered

Northern Territory: Critically Endangered



Night parrot. (WT Cooper, National Library of Australia)

Description

The night parrot is a medium-sized (22-25 cm head-body length) bird with a dumpy build and a short tail. The head, neck, upperbody and chest are bright green, whereas the rest of the underparts are yellow-green to yellow. The body plumage features a range of black and yellow streaks, bars and spots. The uppertail is black-brown in the centre and pale yellow on the sides. When wings are folded, the primary flight feathers are black-brown. The bill, legs and feet are blue-grey. The eyes are dark. Sexes are similar in size and appearance.

Distribution

The distribution of the night parrot has not been well documented, but it is restricted to arid and semi-arid Australia. Twenty-two museum specimens existed prior to 1990, all but one taken in the 19th century. Of the specimens, three were collected in north-west and north-central Western Australia (including the only 20th century specimen in 1912) and the remainder in South Australia (Forshaw et al. 1976). F. W. Andrews collected 16 of the South Australian specimens in the vicinity of the Gawler Ranges and Lake Eyre in the 1870s. A specimen was apparently taken in south-west New South Wales in 1897 (Forshaw 1970)

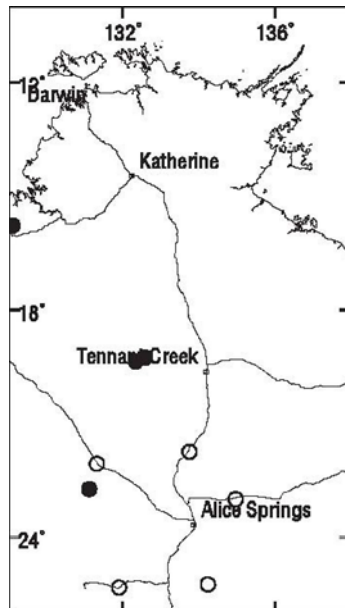
and a number of recent sightings, including a carcass by the roadside in 1990, come from north-western Queensland in the vicinity of Boulia and Cloncurry (Boles et al. 1991; Garnett et al. 1993). Prior to the discovery of the 1990 specimen, the night parrot was widely considered to be extinct.

No specimens of the night parrot have been taken in the Northern Territory; however, sightings were made up to 1923 at the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, Horseshoe Bend Station, Idracowra Station, Henbury Station and Hermannsburg (Whitlock 1924). The notes of the Horn Expedition indicate that the species was relatively common in central Australia in the 1890s, but by the 1920s it was already scarce (Whitlock 1924). Potential sightings in the Northern Territory between 1950 and 2005 are from Harts Range, Stirling Station, Muckaty Station, Keep River National Park, Kildurk Station and the Tanami Desert. A well-publicised potential sighting of the species in the Northern Territory was in January 1996 when two individuals were reported at dusk near a stock watering point on Newhaven Station, 350 km WNW of Alice Springs.

Conservation reserves where reported:

There are no conservation reserves in the NT where populations of night parrot are known

to be extant. The only recent (post 1930) records in reserves are of one possible sighting in Keep River National Park, and the 1996 record from Newhaven (managed by Australian Wildlife Conservancy and Birds Australia as a reserve).



Known locations of the night parrot.

□ = pre 1970; • = post 1970.

Ecology

Almost all our knowledge of the night parrot comes from the observations of naturalists from the late 19th century. The night parrot appears to be a nocturnal bird that forages on the ground. During the day it rests within clumps of spinifex. It also nests within spinifex hummocks, building a rough nest in which up to four white eggs are laid. The bird becomes active during dusk and, generally, flies to water to drink prior to foraging. The diet consists of seeds of grasses and herbs, particularly those of spinifex (*Triodia*).

The night parrot appears to be highly nomadic, moving in response to availability of food and water. After periods of heavy rain with abundant seeding of spinifex, the species was often locally common (Andrews cited in Wilson 1937). However, during droughts, the species would disappear from formerly suitable habitat.

The night parrot is known from spinifex grasslands in stony or sandy areas and samphire and chenopod associations on floodplains, salt lakes and clay pans. Suitable

habitat is characterized by the presence of large and dense clumps of spinifex. It may prefer mature spinifex that is long unburnt (Ashby 1924).

A number of calls have been reported. The typical call when birds come into water to drink is described as a long drawn-out mournful whistle that carries for a considerable distance (Bourgoin cited in Wilson 1937).

Conservation assessment

The night parrot may be extinct in the Northern Territory. Although it was apparently not uncommon in the 19th century, numbers declined during the early part of the 20th century with no confirmed records since the mid 1920s. However, regular reports of potential sightings indicate that the species may continue to persist in low numbers.

No systematic field surveys for the species have been undertaken, although a number of people have spoken with and obtained information on records of the species from Aboriginal people. In the absence of suitable surveys and following continued potential sightings, it is not appropriate to classify the night parrot as extinct. Therefore, it is classified as **Critically Endangered** (under criterion C2b) due to:

- a population size estimated to be <250 mature individuals;
- continuing decline in numbers of mature individuals; and
- extreme fluctuations in numbers of mature individuals.

Threatening processes

If any individuals remain in the Northern Territory, key threatening processes are likely to be habitat degradation caused by altered fire regimes and grazing by stock, and predation by introduced carnivores.

Conservation objectives and management

There is no existing management program for this species in the Northern Territory. However, any potential sightings of the

species that seem feasible will be investigated.

More broadly, the conservation outlook for this species will benefit from broad-scale management of feral predators (cats and foxes), reduction in feral herbivores, and amelioration of fire regimes.

Compiled by

Chris Pavey [April 2006]

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