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# A SUMMARY ACCOUNT OF THE CAROLINA PARAKEET IN ARKANSAS

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## ABSTRACT

The extinct Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) once was part of the Arkansas avifauna. The first two reports of the species in what is now Arkansas were made in 1673 and 1718 by early French explorers. The remaining records are from the 1800s when parakeets were found in nearly all parts of the state, often in abundance. The last literature reference for the species still definitely occurring in Arkansas pertains to birds present in the summer of 1885 along the White River at Newport.

## INTRODUCTION

There are 13 species of birds that once nested in Arkansas that were extirpated in historic times as breeding birds in the state (James, 1974). At least 4 additional species have disappeared from Arkansas that formerly were present as migrants and/or wintering birds (Baerg, 1951). Of these 17, two are definitely known to be extinct species (Amer. Ornithologists' Union, 1983). These are the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) and Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*). This paper concerns the history of the knowledge of the latter species in Arkansas, which was the only naturally occurring temperate zone member of the parrot family found in the present North American avifauna.

## EARLY REPORTS

French explorers seem to have been the first Europeans to report the Carolina Parakeet from the region of what is now the State of Arkansas. Louis Joliet, who descended the Mississippi River with Father Marquette to the mouth of the Arkansas River in the summer of 1673, had written at one point: "Perroquets fly in flocks of 10 to 12." Unhappily, it is not possible to place the reference geographically with any precision (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 58:99).

The southward advance of the Marquette party faltered somewhat at the mouth of the St. Francis River, when they were told that they were still ten days' journey from the Gulf of Mexico. Describing typical lower Mississippi valley countryside, their journalist recorded: "We thus push forward, and no longer see so many prairies, because both shores of The river are bordered with lofty trees. The cottonwood, elm, and basswood trees there are admirable for their height and thickness. The great numbers of wild cattle, which we heard bellowing, lead us to believe that the Prairies are near. We also saw Quail on the water's edge. We killed a little parroquet, one half of whose head was red, The other half and The neck yellow, and The whole body green." The party reached the mouth of the Arkansas River before giving up and beginning the return journey toward Illinois and Canada on 17 July (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 59:149,151). Again, no exact place can be determined, although an Arkansas locality is perhaps credible. It was, at any rate a great while before anyone improved upon, or even equalled, that succinct description of the parakeet.

Another early French reference is more substantial (Le Page, 1763). It is also of concern ornithologically, since the author, Le Page du Pratz, was tangentially responsible for the term Louisiana Parakeet sometimes bestowed upon western populations of the parakeet. On the basis of

his remarks, Gmelin (1788:320) erected the name *Psittacus ludovicianus*, the second part of that name meaning "of Louisiana."

Le Page du Pratz, a professional engineer, lived in Louisiana (a general term that referred to the southern part of the French domain in America) for some 16 years following 1718. He traveled on the Mississippi as far north as present day Memphis, as well as elsewhere in the region. On one of his trips in what is now the state of Louisiana he ascended the "Black River" (so called because of its depth; now called the Ouachita River), possibly reaching what is now the State of Arkansas, and wrote: "The woods are like those to the East of the Mississippi, except that to the West there are more walnut and hickory trees. These last are another species of walnut, the nuts of which are more tender, and invite to these parts a greater number of parrots" (Le Page, 1763, 1:281-282). (The "hickory" reference may be to thin-shelled, small fruited pignut hickories, *Carya cordiformis*, or perhaps to the thin-shelled true pecan, *Carya illinoensis*; Le Page's original French version, in fact, used the word "pacanes.")

## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

### Central and Northwestern Regions

It is of interest that William Dunbar, an observant friend of the natural sciences in Mississippi, ascended the Ouachita River (by then it was called the "Washita") to the Hot Springs of Arkansas in the period 16 October 1804 to 26 January 1805. He left detailed and abundant records on game, vegetation and salt springs but said nothing at all about parakeets. We can only guess that parakeets were absent at that time of year or so common that he did not think it worth his while to notice them (Rowland, 1930).

Our confidence that Dunbar told all that he saw is shaken somewhat by the account left by George W. Featherstonhaugh (1835-72; 1844:115), a geologist and a general naturalist of undoubted competence. Thanks to Featherstonhaugh, modern readers can still savor the magnificence of Arkansas countryside as viewed in early December 1834. He was near the Ouachita at the mouth of Caddo River in northeastern Clark county: "This place is the site of an ancient village of the Caddo Indians...and a sweet sequestered situation it must have been to them, for the river contains good fish, the country abounds in game, and the sandstone, with its pines, is here exchanged for a loose soil of the greatest fertility....On sallying out, after our good cheer, we were exceedingly pleased with the scene around us; the sun was shining brilliantly, flocks of parrots were wheeling and screaming around, the trumpet tone of the ivory-billed woodpecker was frequently heard." He recorded an extensive level cane brake and he saw "laurel" tree: of large size and,

with them, holly trees up to 12 inches in diameter.

Featherstonhaugh (1844:86-87) had already seen parakeets in his overland tour through southeastern Missouri (McKinley, 1960) and north-central Arkansas. For example, in present Arkansas, he reported on about 9 November, near the Strawberry River (probably in Sharp County): "We are now on rather a flattish country with open woods, and flocks of parakeets screaming around us."

German-born Hermann Balduin Möllhausen, artist to Lt. Amiel Weeks Whipple's exploring team, surveying the 35th parallel for a railroad route to the Pacific, left an evocative account of his ascent of the Arkansas River in early June 1853. On the way to Little Rock, he recorded that "the parrot climbs chattering from bough to bough." Later when camped in early July near the mouth of Poteau River across the Arkansas River from Fort Smith (and thus technically within what is now Oklahoma), he referred to "the chatter of the parrots on the nearest trees" (Möllhausen, 1858, 1:8,17). Before leaving the Fort Smith region on 15 July, he shot and prepared a specimen of the parakeet (Kennerly, 1859:21). (This skin is now U.S. National Museum specimen no. 3890; it is said to be from Fort Smith; it is not dated precisely and its sex was not recorded.)

A contemporary of Möllhausen, Arthur Lawrie, traveled on the Arkansas River in the winter of 1854, having progressed by steam boat from Indiana down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and up the Arkansas River. He noted in his journal for 16 December (Lawrie, 1944:264): "Saw paroquets for the first time, on the Bayou des Roches" (presumably that small stream now called Rock Creek in Pulaski County, near Little Rock).

Fort Smith continued to be a stronghold of parakeets. Wrote Charles E. Bendire (1895:1,2), who had been stationed there as a member of the Medical Corps of the Fourth Cavalry: "As late...as 1860 they were still comparatively numerous through the Gulf States and the Mississippi, Arkansas, and White River valleys; and I well remember seeing large flocks...through that year in the vicinity of Fort Smith..." And again: "In the vicinity of Fort Smith...during the fall and winter of 1860-61, I frequently saw flocks of these birds in osage orange trees."

That parakeets were commonly noted in that region is further indicated by a report from just north of Fort Smith at Hermannsburg (now Dutch Mills) in present Washington County. Recalling life there Karl Friedrich Hermann wrote about the brightly colored "Paroquets" (his word: he did not use the usual German term "Papageien") that moved gently in the branches of a black locust when the tree was covered with its fragrant flowers in spring (Hermann, 1900:177). Karl Hermann first arrived at Hermannsburg on 8 May 1853 and departed in 1862 (Lemke, 1965).

It is evident that parakeets held out nearly as long in northern and western Arkansas as they did anywhere (see also McKinley, 1960, 1964, 1978). For northern parts of the state, for example, Benjamin T. Gault recorded in 1888: "At one time Paroquets were very plentiful at Paroquet Bluff between Newport and Batesville on the White River, but none have been seen there for at least eight years." (Widmann, 1907:116). (This refers to Independence County.) This more or less coincides with the notice that "in 1885 Mr. W. A. Monroe reported them as summer residents at Newport" on the White River, Jackson County (Howell, 1911:44). (The Arkansas career of Gault is unknown to us; all that we can say of William A. Monroe is that he submitted migratory bird records to the U.S. Biological Survey from 1884 to 1889.)

#### Mississippi Valley Region

Parakeet reports from the Mississippi River valley, except for the pre-1800 French reports, are treated below. For a full picture of Mississippi River records, it is necessary to consult the accounts for Tennessee and Mississippi (McKinley, 1979, 1981).

An early nineteenth century report for the Mississippi River is that of Samuel P. Hildreth, a reliable pioneer naturalist. He left Marietta, Ohio, 21 April 1805, on a small boat bound for New Orleans. The group's trip was a speedy one (he and his companions were leaving Natchez, going southward, on 31 May); but his account hints at an uneven distribution of parakeets, even at that early day. The party evidently saw no parakeets on the Ohio River. Then, in the 140 mile stretch of wilderness (as Hildreth called it) along the Mississippi above Fork Pickering (Memphis), "As they sailed gaily along, the attention

of Charles and Graham was constantly arrested by the noisy chattering of the paroquets. Their gay plumage and lively motions, as they hopped from branch to branch amongst the deep green foliage of the trees, several of which were in flower, afforded a constant theme for remark." Sandhill cranes, swans and pelicans were birds of "more staid habits" (Hildreth, 1842:131). This entry can probably safely be placed in either Mississippi County, Arkansas, or on the Tennessee side, some distance above Fort Pickering. (The uneven distribution of parakeets, even in early times, may be judged from previous analyses of historical reports found in McKinley, 1977 and 1980.)

The early botanist and ornithologist, Thomas Nuttall, found parakeets in the Mississippi River valley in the early 1800s. Thus on 7 January 1819 he wrote (Nuttall, 1821:57-58) that in the "luxuriant wilds of the Mississippi...river lands, as usual, grows platanus or butonwood, upon the seeds of which flocks of screaming parrots were greedily feeding." At the time he was in the vicinity of the mouth of the St. Francis River, but his parakeet comments were a part of an overall commentary summarizing general conditions in the Mississippi River valley.

John James Audubon (1929) several times referred to parakeets in the valley of the Mississippi. To keep the record in one place, and because it is not possible to tell with certainty to which side of the river an entry refers, we shall cite here all his reports from the latitude of Arkansas. He floated from Cincinnati to New Orleans in 1820-1821, leaving 12 October. On 30 November, his party made 25 miles and landed in cold, wet and disagreeable weather just past the Third Chickasaw Bluff below the "Twelve Outlets": "Many birds were seen during the day;" "the Paroquets Numerous in the Woods—" (Shelby County, Tennessee, or Crittenden County, Arkansas; they passed the mouth of Wolf River the next day).

On 2 December, Audubon (1929) noted: "— the Woods literally filled with Paroquets" in rain and cold. They landed at night at "Tow Head, above Island no. 51 (below the Tennessee-Mississippi state line; now called Buck Island and currently in the state of Mississippi, opposite southern Crittenden County). The next day, they were able to float only about four miles, to the foot of the island, Audubon recording that on the island there were "Many dry Nests of Thrushes on the Willow Trees — the Tall Grass with many Sparrows — Saw 2 Flocks of Partridges, Many Paroquets." There had been only two frosts when the Audubon party landed at the mouth of White River. Parakeets were among several species of birds noted in the general area of the nearby mouth of the Arkansas River, Desha County.

On 17 December, the Audubon party landed at "Pointe Chico" (Chicot County, extreme southeastern Arkansas); they had encountered the first "Spanish Beard" (Spanish Moss, *Tillandsia usneoides*) a few miles above. They floated only a few miles on 18 December and on the 19th: "Rain and fog all day — Landed within 7 Miles of Last Nights — Killed a Carrion Crow, a Winter Wren and 16 Paroquets...Immense flocks of Paroquets and Swamp Blackbirds—." The party made only four miles on 20 December and landed on "opposite side of river," where Audubon "boiled 10 Parakeets" to try their supposed toxic effects upon his bitch, "Dash" (why boiled, we do not know, parakeet "guts" were widely alleged to be poisonous). They had by then gone to the boundary of southeastern Arkansas, or perhaps even beyond (Audubon, 1929:51,55,57,71,77,80,81,82; we thank the U.S. Board of Geographic Names for help with modern names of the Audubon localities).

The observant Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Württemberg (1941), did not record any parakeets on the Mississippi River between the mouth of the Yazoo River in Mississippi to near the mouth of the Ohio River on his trip up river in April 1823. This suggests either numbers of parakeets already had declined drastically or that they simply varied dramatically within seasons or years.

McKinley (1979) reported the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont (Pierson, 1938:594) on the parakeet at Memphis, December 1831. Beaumont's colored sketch (now at Yale University) confirmed the identity of the parakeet. A little later in that decade, the Swedish traveler Carl David Arfwedson (1834, 2:96) steamboted up the Mississippi, having left New Orleans about 1 February 1833. His only reference to parakeets came on the fifth day, when the party was somewhat south of the mouth of the Arkansas River (therefore,

## A Summary Account of the Carolina Parakeet in Arkansas

Chicot or Desha counties, or on the opposite side in the State of Mississippi). As, apparently, with pioneer travelers everywhere, they went ashore at every stop with loaded firearms: "I landed, with a few of my fellow-travelers at one of the firewood stations, with an intention of killing some of the small green parrots, which were flying in thousands about in the wood...Our sportsmen came running in every direction from the wood, carrying on their shoulders a variety of birds, among which parrots were the most conspicuous, on account of the beauty of their plumes."

Anderson (1907:126,271) mentions that "about a dozen specimens" of parakeets were in the Museum of Natural History at the University of Iowa that "were taken by D. H. Talbot's collectors at the mouth of the Arkansas River in 1882." The "Arkansas River" is apparently Anderson's interpretation of Talbot's designation "Mouth of Grand River" which has been shown to be the Grand River in present day Oklahoma where Talbot's collectors were active in 1882 (Hahn, 1963; McKinley, 1964; plus entries in the early museum ledgers, University of Iowa Museum of Natural History). Therefore, these specimens are not from Arkansas.

## SOME FINAL REMARKS

The preceding documentation shows that Carolina Parakeets once were found in most parts of Arkansas, sometimes in abundance, but were not reported after 1885. We hereby summarize a series of increasingly vague references to parakeets, all of them inferentially at least including Arkansas. Baird *et al.*, (1874:587) reported parakeets "still found in considerable numbers" in Arkansas but cited no specific localities. Oliver P. Hay (1882) saw none in his survey of birds in the lower Mississippi valley in the summer of 1881 but heard "that it had been seen in southeastern Arkansas." The second AOU Check-List (1895:152) indicated the species was present, although "only of local occurrence," in Arkansas. Robert Ridgway (1916:147), for reasons apparently known only to himself, held out the hope that "if still existing to be found only in small numbers in very restricted areas in bottom lands of southwestern Arkansas or northwestern Louisiana."

Except for the scholarly review by A. H. Howell (1911), the parakeet in Arkansas has been all but ignored in the twentieth century. H. E. Wheeler (1925:6) included the species "but considered as with meagre evidence." Baerg (1951:74) referring to Howell stated: "The most recent record for Arkansas is apparently 1885."

A final note pertains to a parakeet specimen in the U.S. National Museum. It is a mounted bird of unknown sex but immature age labeled simply "Arkansas?" and marked "rec'd prior to Sept. 1844 from Major W. B. Lewis." According to Michael J. Brodhead (letter, 28 March 1984), W. B. Lewis possibly was William Berkeley Lewis, the Nashville, Tennessee, friend of Andrew Jackson who was Jackson's quartermaster in the War of 1812 (see the entry for him in "Dictionary of American Biography"), not a major in the regular army (not named in Heitman's "Historical Register and Dictionary of the U.S. Army") but sometimes bore the honorific title of "major." Nothing, however, is known concerning the parakeet specimen he apparently possessed that eventually became specimen no. 23,700 in the U.S. National Museum.

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Daniel McKinley and Douglas James

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