

REVIEW

The Carolina Parakeet: Glimpses of a Vanished Bird.—Noel F. R. Snyder. 2004. Princeton University Press, ISBN 0-691-11795-0. xii + 153 pp. \$32.95 cloth.—Of Florida's five birds that became or presumably became extinct or extirpated during the 20th century, perhaps none is more enigmatic than the Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*). Unlike the other four birds—the Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), Ivory-billed Woodpecker (*Campephilus principalis*), Bachman's Warbler (*Vermivora bachmanii*), and Dusky Seaside Sparrow (*Ammodramus maritimus nigrescens*)—the causes of the parakeet's extinction are largely unknown. Unregulated shooting—for sport, to prevent crop depredation, and for scientific collections—often is cited as the primary cause of the parakeet's extinction but is usually discounted because this activity was localized. Other gaps in our knowledge of the parakeet's biology include the year when the parakeet became extinct in the wild, and whether or not it nested exclusively in cavities, entered a state of torpor when roosting, or if its preference for cockleburs rendered it toxic to predators.

In this short book, Noel Snyder, a former Floridian, weaves two stories, centered primarily in the interior of Florida's peninsula during the early 20th century. The first is a reconstruction of the biology of the Carolina Parakeet based on historical accounts and interviews with residents of the Okeechobee area who observed the parakeet decades earlier. Snyder's second story, which I found to be more interesting because it is less conjectural, involves the interplay of ornithologists, oologists, "sportsmen," Audubon wardens, and other fascinating characters who lived in the region about 80 years ago.

The book is divided into ten chapters: 1) Basic Characteristics of the Species; 2) The Decline and Fall; 3) Controversial Last Records; 4) Habitat Preferences and Requirements; 5) Feeding Habits and Movements; 6) Breeding Habits; 7) Causes of Extinction; 8) Parakeet Toxicity and Other Topics for Research; 9) Postmortem of a Conservation Failure; and 10) Evaluating Historical Data, and some General Conclusions. The book contains two color illustrations of Carolina Parakeets and 36 black-and-white photographs of people or locations mentioned in the book. I enjoyed the contemporary painting by John Schmitt of a Carolina Parakeet family at their nest cavity, as well as the numerous photographs taken during the 1930s by Alexander Sprunt, Jr., which are handsomely reproduced in this book. I was surprised to learn that John James Audubon's plate of the Carolina Parakeet may inaccurately portray juvenal plumage as being entirely green. Snyder reports that every extant specimen of juvenile Carolina Parakeets has an orange patch on the forehead (a character included in Schmitt's painting). Snyder relates an entertaining tale originally published by Robert Porter Allen (1938). The story involves eggs collected on the Kissimmee Prairie in 1930 for Charles Doe, a well-known but little-liked Florida oologist. Apparently Doe "bounced" a check written for payment of the eggs and was forced to flee the area to avoid bodily harm at the hands of the collectors! The eggs were placed in a large metal can and were nailed to a tree behind a store in Basinger (in present-day eastern Highlands County), and were rediscovered—apparently in good condition—eight years later by Allen and others.

While much of the natural history of the Carolina Parakeet is taken from existing references, Snyder provides "new" information that he obtained by interviewing residents of the Okeechobee area who knew the parakeet in life during the 1910s-1920s. These interviews, which were aided by Audubon warden Rod Chandler, took place in 1979 and 1981. All those who Snyder interviewed have since died, and their information is published for the first time in this book. While some of this information doubtlessly is factual, other remembrances seem to me to be far-fetched, such as the claim that some parakeets roosted in barns and houses, hanging from the rafters by their bills rather

than using their legs to perch. Elsewhere in the book, Snyder accepts as factual several historical statements that have been discounted by other ornithologists (e.g., Bailey 1925, Howell 1932, McKinley 1985).

Among the questionable statements that Snyder accepts are that Carolina Parakeets built open twig nests in addition to nesting in cavities, and that parakeets—including those in Florida—fell into a state of torpor when roosting. Regarding the cup nests, Snyder refuses to discount the few second- or third-hand historical reports even though no ornithologist ever witnessed such behavior, and even though no other psittacid in the world is known to nest in both cavities and open nests. Snyder suggests that exotic diseases, perhaps transmitted by chickens, contributed to the extinction of Carolina Parakeets, although he admits that no historical or recent observations exist of any other psittacid in the New World being similarly affected by diseases transmitted by domestic fowl. Aside from the parakeets, Snyder accepts William Bartram's 18th century observations of King Vultures (*Sarcoramphus papa*) in Florida—often dismissed by others as a misidentification of Crested Caracaras (*Caracara cheriway*)—and suggests that the birds became extirpated by Indians who sought the vulture's feathers! Shockingly, Snyder claims that Ivory-billed Woodpeckers were not old-growth forest specialists, and cites as proof of this belief the presence of the woodpeckers "hanging on" in Cuba. On the contrary, the few remaining Ivory-billed Woodpeckers in Cuba were found in the few remaining pockets of old-growth forest, and the birds are now considered extirpated from that country, having last been seen in 1988 (Jackson 2004).

Snyder anticipates criticism of his faith in the hearsay data that he gathered about Carolina Parakeets, and I chuckled at his contempt for "a few ornithologists [who] even build their reputations by denouncing the gullibility of those who accept sightings of rare species that are not supported by airtight evidence." I was disappointed that an ornithologist of Snyder's caliber would so boldly put faith in hearsay evidence based on 50- or 60-year old recollections, especially when he mentions two instances in which his own (much more recent) memory was faulty. Snyder goes so far as to claim that the hearsay data that he obtained "significantly expands our knowledge of the last days" of the Carolina Parakeet. Elsewhere in his book, Snyder admits that hearsay data are "often of indeterminate accuracy," thereby creating "a problem that poses some thorny problems of interpretation." Thorny problems, indeed.

I found it interesting that none of the hearsay evidence that Snyder presents was mentioned in the *Birds of North America* account of the Carolina Parakeet, written by Snyder and Keith Russell (2002). It is tempting to speculate that either Snyder's co-author or editors struck the hearsay information from the *BNA* account as being too conjectural. On the other hand, perhaps Snyder simply was "saving" the hearsay information for his book, which he calls "an expansion" of the *BNA* account.

I was disappointed that Snyder uses pet-trade names rather than ornithological nomenclature for the other psittacid species that he discusses. A map showing the historical distribution of the Carolina Parakeet and the numerous locations that Snyder mentions would have been a helpful addition to the book. I noted a few minor typographical errors and out-dated nomenclature; Snyder globally refers to the Snail Kite (*Rostrhamus sociabilis*) as the Everglades Kite. For data on naturalized psittacid populations in North America, Snyder quotes Hardy (1973) and Owre (1973)—and nobody else—even though these two citations are greatly out-of-date. There appears to be an inconsistency in Snyder's book about the two purported races of the Carolina Parakeet, the western *ludovicianus* and the eastern *carolinensis*. On page 6, Snyder states that the perceived differences between the two races—primarily plumage coloration—were "modest and variable." However, on page 10, Snyder states that the two purported races "differed significantly in bill, wing, and tail measurements . . . and fairly consistently" in plumage.

Snyder concludes his book by listing several topics of the Carolina Parakeet's biology or history that might be solved by the use of molecular techniques. Among these are the

relationship of *Conuropsis* with other New World psittacid genera such as *Aratinga* and *Myiopsitta*; whether feeding on cockleburs rendered parakeets “unpalatable” to predators; whether “biochemical or morphological traces of pathogens” could be detected in parakeet feathers or skin; and whether the two clutches of eggs collected by Charles Doe in Osceola County in 1927 are genuine Carolina Parakeet eggs. One would hope that scientists are now studying some of these issues in hopes of learning more about what perhaps is North America’s most fascinating lost bird species.

In summary, *The Carolina Parakeet: Glimpses of a Vanished Bird* makes entertaining reading for those interested in the early ornithology of Florida. The book is less successful as a treatise on the natural history of the Carolina Parakeet, owing to its reliance on unproven and otherwise unvetted hearsay data. While I have reservations about Snyder’s faith in some historical data, I recommend this book for birders, ornithologists, and public and academic libraries.

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