

the Carolina Parakeet Mystery

by Tom Marshall, Leesburg, Virginia

The Cincinnati authorities listed the death of the 32 year old male as having occurred sometime during a cold February day in 1918, but for about 20 years reported sightings by reliable sources challenged the official report. Compounding this seventy-year-old mystery are questions today about the true identity of the deceased.

This was not your typical murder mystery. The individual who died that February was not killed, like so many of his family that preceded him; he most likely died of old age. He and his kin had been hunted and driven from their homes, by the greatest of adversaries — man. He was, tragically, the last parrot of his kind.

My concern in this case coincided with my initial interest in parrots. Years ago, I visited the Smithsonian Institution's Natural History Museum in nearby Washington, D.C. for the express purpose of seeing parrot skins. Although I saw many exotics, it was the mounted specimens of the Carolina Parakeet in the Hall of Birds which was displayed in such a realistic setting that made the greatest impression on me.

Here was a race of parrots, native exclusively to the United States and with a range extending into my own state of Virginia that I would never see. The Carolina Parakeet *Conuropsis carolinensis* lived in huge numbers, primarily in the great cypress forests of Florida, Louisiana, and the Carolinas. It lived in smaller numbers in other southern states and was sighted as far north as Ohio. Their large concentration in the south was the result of a heavy dependence (or preference) for the fruit of the cypress tree. These conure-type birds also found the hollow trunks of dead cypress trees to be ideal nests and were known to winter

in them in a state of semi-hibernation when the weather turned cold.

The Carolina Parakeet was also bred in captivity. The first captive breeding occurred in France in 1877. In the U.S. it was bred for the first time by the Philadelphia Zoo in 1885, followed by the Cincinnati Zoo, where dozens were reared, especially after newly captured birds were added to the collection. These parrots appear to have been colony breeders and enjoyed brief popularity as aviary birds in the United States and Europe. However, their being inexpensive, common and noisy contributed to their decline in the supply and demand world of aviculture. They were largely forgotten until it was too late.

Arthur Freud, author of several books on parrots and former publisher of the American Cage-Bird Magazine, uncovered an interesting article in the May-June, 1975 issue of "South Carolina Wildlife," entitled "The Parakeet Mystery" by George Laycock, a natural history writer.

Laycock decided to investigate the death of the last Carolina Parakeet, as he felt it a mystery that the final member of the entire race of parrots endemic to the United States could have been allowed to disappear without incontrovertible records being kept of its passing. The official date of death for the last captive Carolina Parakeet is February 21, 1918. This male parrot, given the name "Incas," died at the age of 32, coincidentally in the same Cincinnati Zoo where Martha, the last Passenger Pigeon, also succumbed.

Laycock wondered if the zoo officials could be premature in tolling the bell of extinction for the last Carolina Parakeet. Could Carolina Parakeets have found refuge from encroaching civilization within some remote swamp or heavily forested area? Laycock mentions in his article that in the spring of 1926, Charles Doe, curator of birds at the University of Florida, actually located three pairs of these parakeets in Okeechobee County, Florida. He did not collect any birds, but he took five of their eggs, which are currently in a museum collection in Gainesville, Florida.

Mr. Laycock next discovered that in

the spring of 1934, a George Malamphy, who had worked at Cornell University, made a journey to South Carolina for the purpose of ornithological research involving the wild turkey. During this period, he reported that he sighted the Carolina Parakeet on eight or nine occasions and in one instance he saw as many as seven at one time.

Based on the possibility that Malamphy might have been correct, the National Audubon Society leased a large area in the same vicinity and, in 1936, established a base camp on the property so that they could make a determined effort to spot the parrot. In their official reports, they indicated the sightings of at least one definite Carolina Parakeet and a number of other sightings which appeared to be Carolina Parakeets. In June, 1938, a game warden in the area spotted a pair of the Parakeets flying with their young.

Another mystery for which the Carolina Parakeet is an illustration is the problem of how parrots have been classified. Classification, according to Joseph Forshaw, "is an attempt to subject living, ever-changing organisms to static, "pigeonhole" arrangements, so it is inevitable that there will be shortcomings." The classification system in use today is an attempt to describe organisms in some kind of order. It is not, however, ordained from above. It is not even very scientific and there may also be a reluctance to reorganize established categories.

The 300-plus species of parrots are really a very homogeneous assemblage of birds, so differences available for separation into lower categories are minor. Taxonomists have always had difficulties classifying parrots and, again according to Forshaw, "most arrangements proposed have been largely artificial. There are no anatomical characters that can be said to be an absolute criterion for attempting to group Parrots and to define their respective affinities."

Although it resembles the *Aratinga* conures, a polytypic (having more than one species) genus, the Carolina Parakeet is classified as the monotypic (one species) genus, *Conuropsis*. Its description, however, is not apprecia-



The Carolina Parakeet frozen in time at the Smithsonian. Which conure in your collection most resembles the Carolina Parakeet?

bly different from that of *Aratingas*. So why isn't it classified as an *Aratinga* Conure? I don't know the answer, and my investigation into this question leads me to believe that neither do the experts.

Aratinga is a genus erected by an individual named Spix (1824) for a group of Central and South American parakeets. *Conuropsis* is a Genus erected by a taxonomist named Salvadori (1891) in volume 20 of the Catalogue of Birds of the British Museum. What made Salvadori so insistent that he had a monotypic genus on his hands was not revealed with his entry in the Catalogue. Forshaw states that Salvadori used a classification system based entirely on external features. He and others of a like-mind who followed have been criticized because emphasis was placed on what are now regarded as relatively unimportant, adaptive characters, but their classification still forms the basis for the taxonomy of all Psittaciformes (parrots)

There must be something about *Conuropsis carolinensis* that makes the "experts" comfortable with having it in

a genus of its own, but I can't find out what it is. Surely Salvadori did not know of all the *Aratinga* conures we know of today. I suspect that he had a very limited sampling from which to compare. Had he the forty-eight species and sub-species of *Aratinga* Conures to compare with the Carolina Parakeet, given all the gradations they offer, he would not have seen the Carolina Parakeet as a super-species, deserving of genus status, but merely a representative on the wide spectrum presented by this group of birds.

I would venture the guess that Salvadori may have labeled the Carolina Parakeet as a monotypic genus for two arbitrary reasons: First, the partial remains of the oldest parrot (20 million years old) from what is now the American Continent was found in Nebraska, and was given the name *Conuropsis fratercula*. That specimen was considered the forerunner of the Carolina Parakeet which facilitated it being labeled *Conuropsis carolinensis*.

Secondly, the Carolina Parakeet was isolated from other parrots. This fact

could certainly make it easier to assume that it was in a genus of its own and this is what I believe influenced Salvadori in 1891.

Forshaw, however, states that some doubt always exists concerning the status of isolates, because one can never be certain whether they would interbreed or not, if brought together with like-birds; it is a matter for taxonomic judgment. (Interbreeding is what defines a species). Today, the prevailing practice is to emphasize affinities, and isolates are generally treated as subspecies or races of a single species. Therefore, I prefer to think of the Carolina Parakeet as the Carolina Conure and I await the day, with the advent of DNA testing and other technological advances, for a revision of the taxonomy of parrots.

The Carolina Parakeet's status as a monotypic genus has not benefited this species. Perhaps its reclassification as an *Aratinga* might suggest the conservation strategy of introduction, by translocation, of a similar species (one which is endangered by habitat degradation or loss elsewhere) into an area of the Carolina Parakeet's former habitat that is not impacted by human activity. Greater knowledge should provide greater discretion for all those who are interested, and open, to ways which we can save parrots.

Is the true identity of the Carolina Parakeet *Conuropsis* or *Aratinga*? Did the Carolina Parakeet/Conure die out in 1918 in an Ohio Zoo or sometime after 1938 in the wilds of South Carolina, or is it possible that somewhere in the depths of the contiguous Florida and South Carolina swamps there exists the remnants of a decimated, but a little wiser, population of America's native parrot? Is parrot introduction into favorable habitat in the United States desirable or feasible? The case of the Carolina Parakeet mysteries should be reopened for further investigation if we want some answers to these questions.

References

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