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Eulogy for the Carolina Parakeet

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By R. Kelly Coffey

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Think of the most remote Appalachian wilderness you have ever visited, and imagine that landscape if you time-traveled centuries into the past.

Would it look much the same as it does today? Not likely, even though it may be “untouched.”

The landscape would be filled with seemingly exotic species: towering chestnut trees, vast expanses of river cane, wolves, elk, panthers, and maybe even buffalo. The strangest sight, perhaps, would be that of a Carolina parakeet. The sad saga of this native North American bird reveals the numerous factors involved in the extinction of a species, and a lost world never to be experienced again.

The Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) was bright green with a vivid orange and yellow head. The range of the bird covered almost all of eastern North America and



extended into the West along river corridors. The Carolina parakeet was so named because it was first scientifically identified in South Carolina by colonial naturalist Mark Catesby. In addition to its bright feathers, the bird was also conspicuously noisy, having a call akin to a scream. The parakeets traveled in large flocks ranging into thousands, creating quite a racket in flight. These flocks, however, fell silent immediately upon landing; a startling audio contrast often noted by observers.

Friend or foe?

The parakeets were generally permanent residents of the area in which they lived, with little evidence of significant annual migrations. In fact, one of the most ironic characteristics of this tropical-looking bird was that it could withstand brutally cold temperatures. A group of early colonists in New York feared the end of the world when parakeets descended on their settlement during a bitterly cold winter.

Though not given to distant migrations, flocks were quite itinerant within a given territory as they searched for food from a variety of sources. Beechnuts, acorns, and various weed seeds were a few of the many items in the bird's diet. In some locations the parakeets fed on the seed of cultivated fruit trees. They tended not to consume the fruit itself, but destroyed it in an effort to reach the seeds inside. Such habits enraged farmers, who readily gunned them down. These episodes resulted in numerous parakeet deaths because the uninjured birds did not try to escape, but had a heart-wrenching habit of flocking around a wounded companion, crying mournfully, and thus becoming easy targets themselves.

While parakeet attacks on apples, peaches, and pears were devastating to both fruits and birds, evidence suggests that

these occurrences were not universal, and unlikely to be the major factor in the extinction of the species. Paradoxically, some folks viewed the birds as beneficial. The parakeets' favorite food was cocklebur, a plant common throughout the continent. Cocklebur typically grows best in cleared areas, meaning that it was a common weed around home sites. Many people welcomed the parakeets because their consumption of cockleburs reduced weeds around the house. A secondary benefit of cocklebur to the parakeet was that it contained a toxin that, although harmless to the bird, could be lethal to animals that ate the parakeets.

Catesby noted: "Their guts are certain and speedy poison to cats." As a result, the bird had few predators. Cockleburs are also toxic to livestock, so the presence of parakeets indirectly protected farm animals from poison. Another remarkable aspect of the bird's diet was its fondness for salt. Carolina parakeets flocked to locations with natural saline springs or "salt licks." The bird's need for a dietary salt supplement, however, was not crucial, as parakeets were common in areas without salt licks.

Carolina parakeets could be tamed quite easily, and many were kept as pets; with some living as long as 30 years in captivity. A Carolina parakeet that died in 1918 in the Cincinnati Zoo is frequently identified as the last living bird of the species. Many reliable records, however, indicate that Carolina parakeets hung on for many more years in the wild. The last recorded sighting of the bird occurred in 1944 in North Carolina.

What went wrong?

Carolina parakeets were fairly common until the mid-1800s, when their diminishing numbers became more apparent. The most tragic aspect of the parakeet's extinction is that its decline was widely noted for decades before the last one died. Yet no evidence suggests that attempts were made to

save the species. In fact, the prospect of its disappearance actually spurred many people- including reputable ornithologists- to shoot more birds in order to collect specimens before it was too late. Even more incomprehensible is that despite the existence of numerous pet parakeets, no serious efforts were made to breed the birds in captivity.

Numerous reasons have been cited for the extinction of the Carolina parakeet, including:

- Habitat destruction is perhaps the most obvious but certainly not the exclusive cause of its extinction. The bird favored large, hollow tree cavities for roosting and nesting (although some controversial evidence suggests that they built twig nests as well).
- Competition from European honeybees for nesting cavities. The role of honeybees in the parakeet's decline was likely small, considering that the bees prefer a much larger tree cavity than the bird typically used.
- An interesting theory is that the conversion of huge river canebrakes to farmland and pasture precipitated the bird's decline. River cane produces seed erratically, with as long as a decade or more between seed-producing episodes. According to this theory, the sporadic abundance of cane seed as a food source triggered the breeding of Carolina parakeets. When the canebrakes diminished, the parakeets lost this signal to reproduce. An intriguing explanation, but impossible to prove.
- The parakeets were hunted to oblivion for their colorful

feathers to adorn ladies' hats. A likely factor, but other heavily hunted bird species survived this fashion fad.

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The birds' preference for cockleburrs. Although the spread of settlements may have initially benefited parakeets by increasing the distribution of cockleburrs, the bird was likely exposed to exotic diseases found among domestic farm animals. Carolina parakeet expert Noel Snyder identifies this situation as the most significant factor in the parakeet's demise.

The extinction of the Carolina parakeet is somewhat puzzling, considering its ability to adapt to various food sources, nesting sites, and climates; lack of predators, and easy adjustment to captivity. The disappearance of the bird is a lesson in the complexity of elements that sustain life, and how seemingly insignificant human actions can have unintended and cumulative consequences.

Given the recent discovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker- another bird long thought extinct- is there any hope that Carolina parakeets still exist, deep in a protected wilderness?

No. Considering the unmistakable characteristics of the bird- its vivid colors, screaming flocks, attraction to human habitats- any surviving parakeets would have been easily spotted years ago.

Perhaps more than any other creature, the Carolina parakeet was the epitome of that teeming landscape Europeans encountered when they arrived in America, and an emblem of the richness of life that has since been impoverished, even in the wildest locations.

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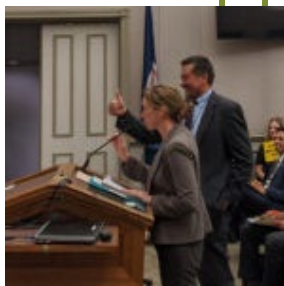
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