

HOW TO FIND A NIGHT PARROT



Many birders have dreamed of finding a Night Parrot. Most thought they never would. But amazingly, since 2013, Night Parrots have been discovered at several sites across the dry inland of western Queensland, through to the northern Pilbara of Western Australia, with another likely encounter in the Northern Territory.

Australian Birdlife asked two of the groups that have been fortunate enough to see these elusive 'ghost birds' to share their perspective on what it takes to find a Night Parrot and how every discovery can add to the small but expanding field of knowledge on one of the world's most enigmatic birds.

THE BIRDERS' PERSPECTIVE

By **Nigel Jackett**, Broome Bird Observatory Warden

History tells us that finding Night Parrots would never be easy. Collectors from the 19th and 20th centuries were only able to accumulate a couple of dozen specimens despite numerous endeavours to find more. The species would 'disappear' from science for long stretches of time, before intriguing encounters would bring them into the spotlight once again. In March 2017, a group of four birders from Broome (myself, Bruce Greatwich, George Swann and Adrian Boyle) pursued such an encounter, in the interior of Western Australia.

In today's technological age, looking for a particular bird can be as simple as going online, finding the most accessible location one was seen, following some other specific directions, before finally seeing the bird! We tried following these steps for Night Parrot, but quickly realised there might be a little more to it...

Fortunately, we realised this shortcoming many years ago, and realised that if we were ever going to find them, we'd need to put in a more serious effort. We tried a range of search techniques—spotlighting samphire flats, waiting at waterholes, setting up night-motion cameras, scrutinising spectrograms, and lunar-lit listening were all given a red-hot go. But though we may have been getting close, we still hadn't found what we were after.

John Young provided the spark we needed in 2013, when he revealed unquestionable photos of Night Parrot habitat. Bruce and I flew to Townsville to hear him speak, and there we gained further insights into what the bird's habitat looked like. Just a year later, we were travelling through the interior of WA and found ourselves at a saltlake fringed by beautiful expanses of unburnt spinifex, strongly resembling the ring-shaped form where the birds were found in Queensland. We had found our missing link—this was an area worth exploring!

In early autumn this year, following above-average rainfall, the four of us attempted our long-anticipated search in an area not far from where we had our revelation several years earlier. It was a nine-day journey into the heart of the state.

During our first night of listening, in our first patch of spinifex, a mysterious, distant bird called briefly, but what was it? We slept on it. We revisited this mystery bird the next night, and again, heard many more calls, this time much closer. It was a drawn-out, hollow whistle, surrounding us. Then more silence.

By this time the calls of Night Parrots from Queensland had been released, but they didn't quite tally with what we were hearing—the drawn-out whistle was very different from anything recorded in Queensland, though the call that seemed to respond to the whistle was like a super-rapid version of the Queensland "dink-dink" call.

The four of us sat down in a small clearing within the dense spinifex plain to consider our options. Someone's GPS or camera was quietly beeping in their backpack. We ignored it. Was the hollow whistle we had just heard a Spotted Nightjar, which we'd seen flying over the spinifex earlier? It couldn't have been, surely one of us would have heard that call before. More beeps from the backpack—for the photographers reading, imagine the beep a camera makes when you half hold down the shutter button in order to focus.

"Someone's GPS is still on," Adrian whispered, looking towards Bruce and George, in the direction the sound was coming from. Bruce checked his camera, and George said quietly, "My GPS is off." Weird. Suddenly, the drawn-out whistle sounded beside us, quickly followed by a beeping response.

Everyone's hearts raced.

Above: The Night Parrot discovered in Western Australia flies off into the spinifex. Photo by Nigel Jackett

FIVE EASY STEPS TO FINDING YOUR OWN NIGHT PARROT



Above: The first confirmed photograph of a juvenile Night Parrot was taken at a study site in western Queensland. Photo by Nick Leseberg

“We should record it,” Adrian said.

“I already am,” answered Bruce. We listened in the still of the starry night, but there were no more calls. We shone our head torches into the adjacent spinifex. A Little Button-quail froze in the light. We were now all utterly confused—surely these calls weren’t made by that?

The next morning, after a pre-dawn listening session (when we heard several more distant whistles), Adrian, Bruce and I went over our recordings from the previous night, while George continued birding. We checked through our field guides—a “mournful whistle” was one description of a Night Parrot call. After listening to the recordings over and over, we convinced ourselves that these strange sounds could only have been the calls of Night Parrots. Was this it—had we done what we had set out to do?

“George is walking pretty quickly,” I said to the others. We all turned to look at him trooping towards camp. It was mid-morning and already quite hot, but he clearly had energy to burn. Twenty metres from camp, he caught his breath.

“Night Parrot. I just flushed a Night Parrot.”

After some brief celebrations, we realised we still needed a photo to provide definitive evidence that what we had found were indeed Night Parrots. Returning to the spinifex plain, we held our breath with each slow stride as we walked determinedly towards where George saw his bird. A wide smile remained on George’s face. Then, when we were still 50 metres from where he saw it, one flushed from underneath his feet.

“There we go!” called George.

Looking up, a stunningly vibrant, long-winged parrot sailed low across the top of the spinifex, as the sound of camera shutters fired in the background. We stared at the backs of our cameras, elated but in disbelief.

Birders can make significant contributions towards our understanding of poorly known species. We knew we had a rare opportunity to make such a contribution, so spent the remaining nights recording the calls of the Night Parrots, and taking habitat notes during the day. We intend to publish our findings in the near-future, with the hope that they will help with finding more populations in WA, and that the species and its habitat will be better managed if future developments potentially impacting on them are given the go ahead.

1. Do your research

The Night Parrot Recovery Team website (www.nightparrot.com.au) is an excellent place to start, as there is up-to-date information regarding the calls, habitat preferences, and movements of Night Parrots. Delving back into the historic literature is also worth doing—Google Scholar can be a handy tool for finding historic accounts of Night Parrot specimens and sightings. Learn as much about their calling behaviour and roosting and foraging habitat as you can.

Night Parrots occur in some of the most remote parts of Australia. Arid birding is often very productive in the early morning and late afternoon, but during the heat of the day it’s best to sit back and flick through the historic accounts. It is also essential that you are well-prepared in the event that you are stranded for several days or longer. Let others know where you are planning on going, and ensure your vehicle and equipment is fit-for-purpose. Large swathes of suitable Night Parrot habitat occur on private land, so make sure you have permission from relevant land owners before accessing such sites.

2. Pick your spots

The range of the Night Parrot is so vast, so choosing your starting point is often the hardest part. We picked a region in Western Australia where we knew Night Parrots had definitely been found before and then used satellite imagery (Google Earth) to search the region for prominent features known to be associated with Night Parrot occurrence, such as salt lakes, spinifex expanses, surrounding plains of chenopods (succulent shrubs) and breakaways (rocky outcrops). If we found all three of these land features near one another, we noted such sites as very good places to look.

Research in western Queensland shows that Night Parrots prefer roosting in long-unburnt spinifex, and this knowledge was the key to our success. We could identify such areas using satellite imagery, as the unburnt spinifex appeared as densely packed, but well-defined, concentric rings.

It’s also worth understanding the other birds associated with Night Parrot habitat. For example, Rufous-crowned Emu-wrens and Spinifexbirds also prefer long-unburnt spinifex. If you are finding these two indicator species, that could be a clue that the spinifex might also harbour Night Parrots—return after dark!

3. Look and listen

The easiest way to find nocturnal birds is to listen for them, and this applies to the Night Parrot. Night Parrots have been shown to call from their roost sites soon after sunset and soon before sunrise. During the middle of the night they can call at any time, often well away from roost sites.

The calls of the Night Parrot appear to vary across their range. This means depending on where you are you may be hearing Night Parrot calls without knowing it. If you hear calls that you aren’t familiar with, do your best to record them, even on your smart phone (tip—make sure your fingers aren’t covering the microphone when recording!). Try to describe the calls the best you can by documenting the number of notes heard in a call, whether the pitch of the notes rises, drops or stays level, and how often they repeat such phrases (i.e. every 30 seconds, every five minutes etc.).

4. Get the timing right

Night Parrots appear to increase their calling activity following significant rainfall events in the arid zone. The couple of months after such an event would be a very good time to go and listen for them. However, such rainfall events often coincide with limited access, so expect roads and tracks to be closed or impassable.

5. Be ready for anything

The amount of evidence needed to prove that you’ve found a Night Parrot is far more demanding than for almost any other species. If you are walking through suitable spinifex during the day, make sure you have your binoculars and camera at the ready in the event that one flushes, as you won’t have a lot of time for photos before the Night Parrot disappears out of sight. At night, you may only get a flash of one scurrying from the road or whizzing in front of your headlights. If this happens, turn your car off, listen, and record. Return the next night around the same time and try again. The more clues you can piece together, the better your chances are of confirming a Night Parrot. If either circumstance arises, take good photos of any habitat you may have found, including the vegetation found in the immediate vicinity. If you have a GPS, mark the positions where you may have seen, or heard, a Night Parrot.

THE RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVE

By **Nick Leseberg** and
James Watson, University
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Four years since John Young found a tiny population of Night Parrots living in western Queensland, it now seems like the blasted things are falling from the sky! However, despite further discoveries in Queensland and the recent breakthroughs in Western Australia and perhaps also the Northern Territory, the Night Parrot remains deeply mysterious, even to those researching the bird. So, how are we trying to solve the Night Parrot puzzle?

Immediately following John's discovery, a thorough scientific research program commenced, led by Steve Murphy. Early on, the only certainty was that the birds sheltered in dense spinifex during the day. Initial progress was slow and painstaking, in extreme weather and rugged terrain, but after three years a number of important discoveries have been made.

Night Parrots in western Queensland seem relatively sedentary and predictably vocal. Pairs or small groups occupy areas of long-unburnt spinifex, sometimes for extended periods. The parrots call to each other in the first hour after sunset, often flying around and interacting during that time. They also call for 30 minutes or so just before sunrise as they settle into their roosts.

Much has been learned about their habitat requirements after two Night Parrots were

captured and fitted with tracking devices. In May 2016, a male wore a tiny GPS tag that logged his exact location over five nights. Travelling miles away from his roost to feed on grassy floodplains, stony pavements, small drainage lines and even roadsides, one night he clocked up at least 40 kilometres. On another he visited a farm dam near midnight, finally answering the question of whether, when and where the parrots drink.

In parallel with Steve's research, Bush Heritage Australia (BHA) was enlisted to help protect the land where the Night Parrots had been found (following an 18-month interim stewardship arrangement funded by Fortescue Metals Group). The parrot's presence on a conservatively stocked cattle station suggested grazing was not an immediate threat, although a change of ownership was set to see some grazing intensification. In a win for both the leaseholder and conservation, BHA negotiated the purchase of a section of the property at market value (despite rumours to the contrary). Named Pullen Pullen Reserve, this land is now managed specifically for Night Parrots.

Fences are a known risk to Night Parrots (a specimen found in 2006 was found decapitated next to a barbed wire fence), but a new boundary meant the neighbours

needed a new fence to keep their cattle on the property. To mitigate this risk, the fence uses a plain wire top strand, and high visibility tape along the section near where Night Parrots were known to occasionally feed. BHA was also able to negotiate an arrangement whereby seven kilometres of old fence could be used as the working boundary, limiting the length of new fence required. The new sections of fence are being monitored closely and there are already signs that this new approach is working, with increased food availability in the destocked reserve, perhaps supporting the almost continuous breeding that has been detected over the past 13 months.

Following its creation, the public revelation of Pullen Pullen's location prompted the Queensland government to place a conservation order over the property, preventing unauthorised access. This angered a few within the birding community, as did the decision to temporarily withhold the calls of the Night Parrot. It was argued that the sensible majority were being unfairly tarnished for the prospective sins of the few, and that others would be prevented from searching for more birds.

These decisions were made on the advice of government departments and the Night Parrot Recovery Team (NPRT). The team includes representatives from state

and federal governments, conservation groups, and some of Australia's foremost ornithologists and field researchers. The priority was to protect the birds on the reserve and the integrity of the research underway; remember, at the time only a very small number of birds (fewer than ten) were known to exist, at only two sites on Pullen Pullen. With no guarantee disturbance would not disperse the birds, and uncontrolled playback likely interfering with critical data collection, the precautionary principle was rightly applied.

Night Parrots have now been detected on Mount Windsor station, and the Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) has also reported birds in Diamantina and Goneaway National Parks. With Mount Windsor soon to be declared a nature refuge, more than one million hectares of land in western Queensland will be under management for Night Parrot conservation. With the risk spread more widely, the NPRT was able to release the calls on the Night Parrot website, allowing everyone to hear those beautiful notes.

Unfortunately, it will be some time before any of these sites are publicly accessible to birdwatchers wanting to see the Night Parrot. Although it is certain the birds are more widespread, only a few sites are known despite much searching. Even a single person trampling spinifex or using

excessive playback at any of these spots could seriously impact the birds and the ongoing research program. Access to these sites must remain controlled for now.

But for those wanting to see the Night Parrot, active searches for more birds are underway. Led by the University of Queensland, the current research program is focused on constructing a habitat model that can predict where more parrots might be found, and finding more populations in western Queensland is a critical component of building that model. Combined with the evaluation of possible threats such as feral predators, grazing and fire, this will inform management of the landscape to ensure the bird's continued survival.

As more than a century of experience tells us, searching for Night Parrots is an extremely challenging task, but one any birder can help us with. So, if you're planning a trip to Night Parrot country, jump on the Night Parrot website. There is detailed information on how to identify the bird, what habitat it prefers, what it sounds like, and most importantly, what to do if you think you've found one. If you're waist deep in spinifex at sunset and hear what sounds like a Bell Miner, let us know!

Above, from left: Nick Leseberg, from the University of Queensland, sets up Night Parrot tracking devices at his study site at Bush Heritage's Pullen Pullen Reserve in western Queensland. Photo by Andrew Dawson

An aerial view of the stark Queensland outback the Night Parrot calls home. Photo by Nick Leseberg