

Paradise Lost: Encounters with Australia's Extinct Parrot

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Abstract

The paradise parrot is mainland Australia's only bird to have become extinct since white settlement. First named by British ornithologists in 1844, the bird has not been seen since 1927, its population declining rapidly due to changes in land-use.

This creative-critical article investigates the history of the bird alongside personal encounters with six paradise parrot skins found in the storerooms of three UK museums, questioning whether the presence of such bodies negates our sense of total absence. It looks at changing taxidermy practices, and ongoing curatorial work to protect specimens from decay, refuting Donna Haraway's notion that taxidermy animals have 'transcended mortal life, and hold their poses forever'.

This enquiry examines what kind of encounter is generated between the viewer and taxidermy animal, and how this might enable us to bear witness to species loss during an age of mass extinction.

Key words: taxidermy, museum, extinction, birds, encounter

A totally new parrot

On 8 June 1844, near the Condamine River, southern Queensland, the British naturalist and explorer John Gilbert wrote that he had discovered a 'totally new' parrot. He was writing to his employer in London, the ornithologist John Gould, who had been with him in Australia a few years previously, collecting specimens for what was to become Gould's renowned book *The Birds of Australia*, published in seven volumes between 1840 and 1848. Gilbert had been disgruntled when Gould travelled home in 1840 without him, and had himself eventually returned to London in 1841, staying there for just four months before setting sail for Australia again at Gould's behest (Tree 2004). Having previously been in Western Australia, Gilbert was now on the opposite side of the country, travelling up from Sydney through New South Wales to the Darling Downs. He first encountered the parrot here on 17 May 1844, writing simply in his diary 'Fri 17. To Gores. New Parrot'.¹ The bird, Gilbert informed his employer, was 'without exception the most beautiful of the whole tribe I have ever yet seen in Australia, the mingling of the beautiful shades of green, is its most conspicuous and beautiful character' (Fisher 1985: 12). He went on to describe the colours that appeared on each part of the bird, from its forehead to tail feathers: scarlet, verdigris green, verditer blue, vermilion, emerald green, olive, yellow, and brown. Its name became *Psephotellus pulcherrimus*: the paradise parrot.

In November 2018 I held the skin of a male paradise parrot at the Hunterian Museum, the first I had seen, as it were, in the flesh. A skin is an unmounted taxidermy specimen, used largely for research purposes. It is not the flabby entity the name implies. The animal is stuffed to a lifelike size with wood wool, hemp, or cotton wool. There is no need to insert the glass or plastic eyes, whose semblance of a gaze provides the 'thingness of taxidermy' (Poliquin 2008: 127), and the animal's stuffing protrudes from behind empty eye sockets like snow. Wings are tucked close to the body, legs dangle. Skins are surprisingly light. The parrot was too precious to be removed from its polythene bag, which I held in gloved hands, a physical

distance created by layers of plastic, one of the quintessential materials of the Anthropocene. I had limited time in the store room and a list of specimens to see. I took a photograph with my camera phone. The bird's feathers were scarlet, green, blue, yellow, and brown. Its species had been extinct for almost a century.

For whom and for what purpose does taxidermy of now extinct animals exist? I refer not to the few famous preserved endlings – such as Martha the last passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) and Lonesome George the last Pinta Island tortoise (*Chelonoidis abingdonii*) – but those unnamed animals who are the corporeal remains of a lost species, scattered globally through museum collections, often far from their country of origin. While some are on display, many more are in the 'back-stage' of storage (Kilroy-Marac 2018: 29), seen only by curators and researchers. They may be rare, or damaged, or duplicates, or simply not fit within a museum's permanent display, particularly when UK museums have seen cuts to funding (O'Key 2021: 641), and a reduction in natural history curators over the past decade (Mulhearn 2013: 26). Although skins are useful for research, and can be easily transported and stored, they are rarely on display to the public. Taxidermy mounts inhabit the uneasy ground between life and death, their artifice at best giving them the appearance of what Dominic O'Key terms the 'lively double dead' (O'Key 2021: 638), while exceptional versions may even suggest an 'uncanny spark of animation' (Poliquin 2012: 107). With their lack of liveliness, taxidermy skins are the dead, but the beautiful dead, with the taxidermist having obscured the holes and marks that might indicate the manner of death. Holding a study skin is not dissimilar to encountering a freshly deceased garden bird; its body clean, limp, and preserved, still bearing some sheen of life.

This article uses my own encounters with six paradise parrot skins in three UK museums as a lens through which to think about the work performed by taxidermy of now lost species, during the Sixth Mass Extinction, where the average rate of vertebrate loss over the last century is up to 100 times higher than the background rate (Barnosky *et al.* 2011; Kolbert 2014; Ceballos *et al.* 2015). The history of a taxidermy specimen begins at the moment its life ends (Marvin 2006: 158; Patchett *et al.* 2011), from the location and circumstance of its death to the collection(s) in which it ends up, whether in a private home or museum, on display or in storage. Setting my encounters against the context of the life and loss of the paradise parrot, I examine how these final remains of a species still wield power, in terms of their relation to the once-living bird, the dark history they hold as specimens, and how they can be studied both scientifically and as a narrative entry point into extinction. I investigate the history of these specimens using a form of what Patchett *et al.* (2011: 123) term 'salvage ethnography', which works 'with absence and incompleteness', while recognising that the preservation of and access to these specimens is due to the care, maintenance, and knowledges of the curators.

Personal access is also dependent on individual privilege. My status as a doctoral researcher at the University of Glasgow, with a Research Training Support Grant that covers the cost of UK travel, and the mobility to move within museum spaces, all contributed to enabling my encounters with these birds. Museum curation is the legacy of colonialism and collection, a nineteenth century quest for Western dominance that resulted in the killing of both human and non-human animals. As a white Western female, I cannot disentangle myself from this legacy, or from the language of museums, where once-living animals are present as taxidermy mounts and skins, and recorded as specimen numbers.

In addition to examining unconfirmed records of paradise parrots beyond their date of extinction, I am interested in the physical presence of their bodies within museums across the globe, which are believed to number between 150 and 200.² Extinction is what Dolly Jørgensen calls 'the absence of presence' (Jørgensen 2016: 46-7), a conclusion often reached by the presence of absence (a lack of known animals), whether correctly or not. Do these bodies in museum store rooms negate our sense of total absence, or can encounters with such specimens enable us to bear witness to the enormity of extinction?

Encountering extinction

The last confirmed sighting of a paradise parrot occurred in 1927, in the Gayndah area in Queensland's Burnett district. John Gilbert never knew of the bird's population decline: fourteen



Fig. 1. Lithograph of two male paradise parrots, produced by H.C. Richter from Elizabeth Gould's drawings, from John Gould's *Birds of Australia* (1848).

identifies genus and species – and the English common name. Gilbert wrote to his employer that he would 'know of no species that would delight me more to see "Gilberti" attached to' than the paradise parrot (Fisher 1985: 12). Gould refused, on the grounds that he had recently named a whistler after Gilbert, *Pachycephala Gilbertii*, and instead used his assistant's words: Gilbert's 'most beautiful' parrot became *Platycercus pulcherrimus*, the second word from the Latin 'most beautiful'. Having never seen a paradise parrot himself, Gould relied on Gilbert's meticulous detail, repeating this verbatim in his type description. After a few months, Gould reclassified the parrot from the genus *Platycercus* to *Psephotus*, and in 1913 this changed to *Psephotellus pulcherrimus* when a new genus was proposed (Olsen 2007: 9).³

The English common name struggled to endure; a few decades later the bird was known as 'the beautiful or paradise parakeet', or the 'exquisite parrot'. It was known as the Soldier Parrot, in reference to its stance and colourful plumage, and also the Red-Shouldered Parrot, Ground Parrot, Grass Parrot, and Anthill Parrot, referring to the mounds of termites – known colloquially as white ants – in which it made its nest (Immelmann 1968: 105; Forshaw and Cooper 1981: 233). While these names refer to its appearance and behaviour, there were none that conveyed the parrot's song, such as those for the cuckoo, curlew, and chiffchaff. The

months after its 'discovery', he was killed by a spear in an altercation with Aboriginal people while on an expedition with the German botanist Dr Ludwig Leichhart. He was 33 years old. Gilbert and I were of a similar age when we first encountered the paradise parrot. Our encounters were both fortuitous, but mine was a digital rather than physical stumbling. I had found the bird via the Hunterian Museum's online catalogue, typing 'extinct' in the category marked 'what'. The Hunterian's database does not require its editors to record population status, and results depend on any additional curatorial notes. Although it is not the only extinct bird in the collection, from my search the paradise parrot was the only bird to appear. James Hatley, writing on the Honshū wolf (*Canis lupus hodophilax*), or Ōkami in Japanese, describes how easy it is to select a vanished species to investigate, his own picked from a list on the internet. Had his finger landed elsewhere on the screen, he admits he might have written about a land snail or a river otter instead: with so many species disappearing, our opportunity to understand even one often falls to chance (Hatley 2017: 32).

Gould had not seen the paradise parrot when he gave it its scientific name – the binomial that

Australian journalist Alec Chisholm noted the birds making a 'sweet, plaintive piping' – termed by Klaus Immelmann as 'more tuneful' than that of many other parrots – and a sound of alarm like 'a short, sharp, musical whistle, "Queek!"' (Chisholm 1929: 107; Immelmann 1968: 105).

The paradise parrot would have had an Aboriginal name prior to Gilbert first encountering and killing the bird, but this appears not to have survived. This was unusual, as Gilbert 'was a meticulous recorder of information' (Abbott 2009: 216) and frequently recorded the Aboriginal names for the birds he found. By the time he was travelling through the Darling Downs, however, the majority of Indigenous people had been killed, or expelled and moved on, leading to conflict with other groups (Olsen 2007: 115). The Wakka-Wakka (also Waka-Waka) people were the hereditary custodians of the land. They had maintained the grasses through periodic burning, a practice that resulted in the lushness that would have attracted the early European settlers who used the land to farm sheep, and would have helped preserve the habitat of the paradise parrot and termites, both eaters of grass seed (Olsen 2007: 115-6). The history and lifestyle of the Wakka-Wakka people were bound up with the life and fate of the paradise parrot, each subject to displacement and physical violence from the European settlers, who justified their invasion and colonialization by understanding non-European lands, peoples, and animals as spaces that were 'unused, underused or empty' (Plumwood 2006: 503). The paradise parrot was claimed by the white explorers through naming, their bodies shipped to foreign countries which their live counterparts would never know.

A specimen mystery

As I researched the paradise parrot in the summer of 2019, through Gilbert's diary, out-of-print books – themselves at risk of extinction – and grainy photographs, my own encounter with its physical body in the Hunterian Museum felt distant. I needed something tangible to bring me back to those feathers, scarlet, green, and blue, and to understand how and why a bird hatched in Eastern Australia was now in a museum in Western Scotland. I contacted Maggie Reilly, Curator of Zoology, to try and find out more about specimen GLAHM:108080, aware that with older specimens the risk of dissociation – loss of object details – can be greater. Indeed, the Hunterian Museum had little information on GLAHM:108080, with no collection date, locality, or details on the collector. It was thought the bird had entered the collection by 1930, and possibly before 1912. As the Hunterian collection included several birds, including two other Australian parrot species that are associated with Gilbert or Gould, and the paradise parrot had been rare by the early twentieth century, it was possible to speculate that Gould or Gilbert might have been the source of the skin that found its way into the collection.

Discouraged by the lack of information, I searched other UK museum catalogues for paradise parrots. The World Museum Liverpool's specimens were the first I encountered.⁴ The museum's website held a timeline of Gilbert's life and a record of his unpublished diary, transcribed by Dr Clem Fisher, Emeritus Senior Curator of Vertebrate Zoology and an expert on Gilbert. The diary included notes from Gilbert's trip from Sydney to the Darling Downs, where he first recorded the parrot. Fisher had begun the process of copying out the diary as part of her PhD in 1992; a difficult task, considering that many entries were written in pencil and now faded, or written over later in ink. Online, the catalogue listed two paradise parrots, study skins LIV D789a and LIV D789b, and Fisher informed me that the museum had a third specimen too.

In November 2019 I travelled by train to World Museum Liverpool to meet Fisher and Dr John Wilson, Curator of Vertebrate Zoology, and to see the bodies of those paradise parrots that had been moved from Australia to the UK. I arrived early and walked around the museum's shop, where fist-sized green and orange knitted dodos sat among toy *Stegosauruses*, *Triceratops* and sabre-toothed tigers. There was a rubber mammoth baby teether, and a green *Tyrannosaurus rex* rattle. In *Why Look at Animals?*, John Berger's seminal essay on the rupture that capitalist modernity created between humans and non-humans, he examines how the widespread commercialism of animal imagery began at the same time that animals were withdrawn from daily life (Berger 2009 [1980]: 35). This seemed particularly exaggerated in the museum shop, where extinct animals were the base for cute merchandise, their commodification not dissimilar to the way in which the bodies of once-living animals

were displayed in the museum. Despite having become extinct in the 1600s, the toy dodos lay categorized amongst creatures from the Jurassic period, suggesting that we had mentally placed them in a time zone outside of non-anthropogenic life and death. Perhaps one day the paradise parrot would join them, or already had, in an Australian museum equivalent.

Trains passed underneath the storerooms and occasionally the floor rumbled. The three parrots were laid on a tray, all male study skins, with sticks attached at the base to make the handling of them easier, and empty eye sockets. The tag on LIV D789b recorded that it had been collected – or killed – on 13 July 1844 at Oakey Creek, Darling Downs, by Gilbert, while the information on LIV D789 was scarce; a handwritten note on the tag simply said '[New Zealand!!]', perhaps noting an erroneous record, or indicating that the bird had come from a New Zealand collection. These two birds had their labels exposed, but on the third they had been carefully laminated, encased in protective plastic. This was the one I wanted to see: LIV D789a. It seemed the brightest, with a full and shimmering green breast, a scarlet forehead. And yet the bird was not without damage: there was a gape where the lower mandible was missing, an impairment particularly clear in silhouette. Amongst the many labels tied to LIV D789a's leg was a small one in John Gilbert's neat handwriting, still legible: 'Male. May 17. 1844. Condamine River, Darling Downs, New South Wales'. And on an additional bright red label, absent on the other birds, was written 'HOLOTYPE'.

There is some controversy about this label. A holotype is a single 'name-bearing' specimen used as the sole basis to write a species' scientific description. However, it seems likely that when Gilbert wrote his description of the species it was on the basis of more than one specimen, given that in his letter to Gould on 8 June 1844 he referred to 'all the specimens I have killed' (Fisher 1985: 12). In this case, there is actually no holotype, but syntypes, several specimens of equal 'name-bearing' status. When there is no holotype, one of the syntypes may be elected as the sole 'name-bearing' specimen, becoming known as the lectotype. This is what Witmer Stone, Curator of Birds at the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, did in 1912, nominating one of his Gould Collection specimens as the lectotype on account of the length of its tail (Fisher 1986: 11). Fisher expressed 'some doubt' about Stone's decision, questioning whether the Philadelphia bird was one of the original syntypes, due to its lack of labels (Fisher 1986: 10). These had been removed when Gould's primary collection of Australian birds was sent to Paris in 1847 to be mounted by the Verreaux Brothers, prior to their re-export to Philadelphia (Olsen 2007: 37). If the Philadelphia specimen has indeed been erroneously given the designation of lectotype, then all specimens collected by Gilbert prior to 8 June 1844 – including LIV D789a, which remains the only such specimen with its labels present – should continue to be recognised as syntypes. The date on LIV D789a's tag corresponds to the date when Gilbert and his companion Charles Coxen, Gould's brother-in-law, were at 'Gores' station on the Condamine River, and Fisher believes that it was probably the first specimen that Gilbert had collected of the paradise parrot, although she points out that they could have collected other specimens that day.⁵

Holding the bird in my gloved hands, I was torn between its meaning and its meaninglessness: between the value of it probably being the earliest paradise parrot specimen and the colonialism of scientific naming. The rarity of some taxidermy – both mounts and study skins – elevates it in our minds, such as the stuffed mount of Martha, whose death marked the end of the passenger pigeon lineage. She has featured in many of the Smithsonian Museum's displays over the last century; to use the title of the most recent exhibition, she is now an 'object of wonder', distinct from the other 1,531 taxidermy passenger pigeons thought to exist globally (Greenberg 2014: 214). As now-hallowed specimens, such animals become players in a human narrative around 'discovery' and extinction, taking on new meaning. Parrot LIV D789a may have been one of the parrots from which the species was formally described, but his relatives were in Australia for millennia before Gilbert saw him, and before Coxen shot the bird out of the air.

Paradise lost

The last confirmed sighting of a paradise parrot occurred just eighty-three years after Gilbert first encountered the bird. Population decline was rapid, occurring largely over a twenty-

year period from the 1890s, until a few isolated birds were left for the last few decades of its existence. Writing in 1917, the ornithologist Charles Barnard records how even on an 1882 trip near the Darling Downs 'many [paradise parrots] were seen, and several sets of eggs taken' (Barnard 1917: 235). Until the late 1880s it was also rumoured that a pair of paradise parrots could be bought for five shillings in Brisbane bird shops, suggesting that they were available and not valued highly (Olsen 2007: 80). Trapping for aviaries would have affected local populations, and the paradise parrot did not take well to captivity: the 1879 book *Foreign Cage Birds* advised that 'no other variety... will die upon such short notice and insufficient grounds' (quoted in Olsen 2007: 81). The bird began to disappear when extremely dry years preceding a severe drought in 1902 restricted grass growth, and thus limited the seed on which paradise parrots exclusively fed. Grazing cattle numbers also increased, further restricting the seed available to the parrots, and potentially trampling its termite mound nests (Barnard 1917: 235). Barnard thought it was possible that the bird might have migrated to more verdant areas, but found it 'strange' that they had not yet returned to their original location by 1917 (Barnard 1917: 235). In 1908, David Seth-Smith, the Curator of Mammals and Birds of the Zoological Society of London, travelled to Brisbane to procure a pair of paradise parrots, but found none (Olsen 2007: 81).

With its vanishing, the 'beautiful parrot' became the 'paradise parrot' forever, the name propagated by Chisholm, who began a search for the bird in 1917. For Chisholm, it opened up opportunities for a metaphor. 'With apologies to Milton', began a 1922 column, 'it would not be out of place to term the story here that follows, "Paradise Lost and Regained"' (Chisholm 1922: 4). Chisholm spent four years searching for the paradise parrot before he was able to see one in the wild, initially turning up only 'posthumous notes regarding the species' (Chisholm 1929: 104). A Queensland grazier, Cyril Henry Harvey Jerrard, had sighted paradise parrots in late 1921, and had photographed the birds on the termite mound on which they were nesting in March 1922 (Robin 2001: 119-20). These photographs were the first taken of paradise parrots. They were momentous also for representing the first time that a photograph, rather than dead specimen, was accepted as confirmation of a rare species' existence, reflecting increasing controversy around collecting (McGregor 2021: 157). Chisholm travelled to Jerrard's home in late October 1922. After years of disappointment and false leads, he was astonished to see a male and female parrot, reporting in the 1929 *Birds and Green Places* on the male's beautiful colours, and 'the ease with which both birds stripped the grasses' (Chisholm 1929: 106). Chisholm refers only to the parrot as 'lost', the implication being that it was missing rather than absent, although the final accepted sighting of the paradise parrot by Jerrard occurred just five years later. As McGregor argues, efforts to sustain the bird after its rediscovery were 'meagre and ineffectual', thwarted by rudimentary species knowledge and conservation methods, and limited backing in a time that prioritized economic gain over species loss (McGregor 2021: 156).

Unconfirmed sightings occurred only a few times in the following decades: one from Jerrard's neighbours that was reported to Chisholm in 1929, another in 1936 by a 'correspondent' who did not disclose the location, and a 'credible' sighting in the 1940s (Cayley 1938: 227; Olsen 2007: 231; McGregor 2021: 156). Even in 1968, the German ornithologist Klaus Immelmann wrote that it was not possible to reach a conclusion on the parrots' population status, and that the bird might reappear – as he reported other Australian birds had – 'in large numbers' (Immelmann 1968: 105). A sighting in 1990 recorded not one but five birds, personally observed by Christopher Kierkan, who wrote a 1993 article on the parrot in *Wingspan*, the membership magazine of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (Kierkan 1993: 24). Despite these incidents, Jerrard's observing of the bird in 1927 remains the final official sighting of the paradise parrot.

As with many modern extinctions it is tempting to wonder if the paradise parrot might be a 'Lazarus species', one declared formally extinct through lack of sightings and then rediscovered, although the name implies a return from the dead, as in the Bible story of Jesus raising Lazarus. Famous modern examples include New Zealand's South Island takahē (*Porphyrio hochstetteri*), a flightless rail, which went unrecorded for the first 50 years of the twentieth century before scientists located a few individuals in 1948 (the population remains small but is increasing). The possibility of Lazarus species complicates how we perceive

extinction, and how we might accept it as terminal. Lazarus species have the potential to offer hope, but at a time of great biodiversity loss, too much hope is potentially irresponsible, risking our complacency. In 1997, Australian zoologist Andrew Isles wrote an article which concluded, 'the Paradise Parrot became extinct, or beyond retrieval, by 1927. Prove me wrong' (Isles 1997: 26). His last words seem less of a rebuttal to extinction denialists than a challenge, a plea to the bird itself.

Paradise regained?

On 30 January 2007, a press release from the University of Aberdeen declared 'Extinct parrot resurfaces in Aberdeen'. The paradise parrot had shifted location and time to unexpectedly appear. The article described how a local man, Michael Middleton, had donated several exotic birds to the Aberdeen Zoology Museum, including a kookaburra and a wild budgie, after their cabinet attracted woodworm. Reading the article online, I noted that the accompanying image seemed familiar: it was the paradise parrot illustration from Gould's *Birds of Australia*. The taxidermy specimen itself was not pictured. I searched the Aberdeen Zoology Museum catalogue and found two specimens. These were not simply skins. Online, each description read 'Dry, Mount. Full specimen on a wooden perch and base'.

I travelled to Aberdeen in October 2019. My taxi driver from the station was familiar with the Zoology Museum. He remembered it as part of the building which tragically collapsed during construction in the 1960s, trapping eight men inside and killing five of them. He asked where I'd come from, why I was visiting. When I said I was going to see an extinct parrot he muttered, 'I don't know about parrots, but there are several dodos on the council', and we lapsed into an uneasy silence. The Aberdeen Zoology Building was an imposing concrete structure, and the small museum is situated over two lower floors. Exhibits included a critically endangered New Zealand kākāpō against a painted background, and various birds of prey in killing poses: a buzzard crouching over a rabbit; three white morph gyrfalcon standing on a red grouse. There was also a display of apes which, unsettlingly, featured a human skeleton, too small to be adult.

The assistant curator Hannah Clarke had no knowledge of a specimen presented in 2007, but showed me the two birds listed in the online catalogue, ABDUZ: 24046 and ABDUZ: 24047, a female and a male, donated by the widow of Thomas Augustus Forbes-Leith in the early twentieth century. Forbes-Leith was Scottish by birth but spent much of his life in Australia. Born in 1834, he only settled permanently in the UK in 1890, and died seven years later. He was an honorary member of the Field Naturalists' Club of Victoria and an expert on the parrots of Victoria, publishing a series of papers on them. Hannah Clarke had kindly printed out some scanned sepia photographs of Forbes-Leith, a man with a long beard, looking off to the left of the camera.

The avians were the only group of dry specimens to have a temperature-controlled home, while many others were packed in wooden cabinets lining the corridors. To reduce the risk of pests, even in their protected environment, the birds are kept in plastic bags. If any are found, the infected specimen is placed in a large chest freezer for three days. I felt briefly disappointed by the two paradise parrot specimens, which were not technically mounts, after all. They were listed in the handwritten register as mounted skins: once used as study skins, they had then each been wired up to a perch. The female was the first of her species that I had seen, duller than the male, her back, breast, and wing feathers a pale taupe. There was a slight red mottling at the top of the wing, like spots of blood, and a few streaks of pastel blue and green towards the tail feathers. Online her condition had been listed as 'Poor'. Her eyes were closed in seemingly blissful sleep, due to the empty sockets behind them. Her body betrayed a skin's stiffness, tied to its wooden base like a model rocket, and creating no illusion that this bird could be alive. She had the original collection tag in Forbes-Leith's handwriting, now faded. Someone had transcribed it, 'Beautiful parakeet, *Psephotus pulcherrimus*', and inserted an addendum: 'VERY RARE INDEED'.

Unlike the female, the male's bag did not list Forbes-Leith as the collector, and a tag on his leg read 'no data' under the collector field. A label on the bag noted that the specimen had been cleaned, re-bagged and frozen in November 2014. Unusually for a skin, the male

paradise parrot had black glass eyes. I thought of Poliquin (2012: 41): 'The eyes may be glass, but the animal stares back'. Of the six specimens I had seen in the UK, only this false-eyed bird had any sense of liveliness, an anthropomorphic cheekiness that suggested its head might twist to look at you, although its body was positioned on the perch horizontally, with the parrot facing the table. I turned the bird around, trying to get a photograph, unsettled by something. And then it became clear: he was missing a wing.

I wondered how I hadn't seen it. The right wing had been removed cleanly from the body, displaying turquoise and aquamarine feathers beneath. Its absence ruled him out as a study skin, which would need to be anatomically perfect. Miss Clarke held the perch up at an angle, and the bird made sense. The removal of the wing would have enabled the parrot to sit neatly on a peg at the back of a Victorian cabinet, flush against the wall. I wondered if this was not Forbes-Leith's specimen after all, but the parrot from Michael Middleton's cabinet presented in 2007. Yet again, my encounter with taxidermy paradise parrots felt guided by uncertainty and speculation.

Resisting meaninglessness

Writing on the extinct Honshu Wolf, James Hatley explores a rejection of absolute extinction through naming. He sees the speaking of the wolf's Japanese name, Ōkami, out loud as a way of resisting what anthropogenic extinction threatens: 'the descent into meaninglessness' (Hatley 2017: 37). The animal has been lost, but not the name, and we have a reaction to it. So long as a word of the wolf remains, and that 'one is open to hearing it here and now', Hatley believes that we might oppose the concept of extinction. But it is key that he uses 'Ōkami', a word that falls beyond the 'vocabulary of science' (Linda Hogan, quoted in Hatley 2017: 33), and the most culturally significant version of the wolf's name, indicating a mountain spirit who guides travellers home. With the loss of the Aboriginal name for the paradise parrot, and the people to whom it would have meant something more than 'a beautiful ornament to our cabinets or a desirable addition to our aviaries' (Gould, quoted in Cayley 1938: 223), we have perhaps entered meaninglessness already. Vinciane Despret, describing the extinction of the passenger pigeon, gestures to the futility of language, how humans 'have kept the names in memory but have forgotten what these names evoke' (Despret 2017: 219). In a time where species can be named after the discoverer's partner, or celebrities, Hatley sets too much significance on Ōkami's name as the root of the wolf's meaning.⁶ With the paradise parrot, there is the risk of placing overdue emphasis on the Christian utopian symbolism of its human-given name, understanding the loss of the bird as somehow representative of our ecological sins. Nonetheless, 'Paradise Lost' presented itself as a natural and compelling title for this article, acknowledging the human role in the birds' demise, and that extinction stories will always be told by those other than the lost species. What we have really lost is a distinct parrot that had its own lineage, behaviour, habitat, relationships, and experiences.

In focusing on the parrots' bodies, I wanted to return to the individual physicality of the birds and the question of how the viewer encountered and was affected by taxidermy of now extinct species. Taxidermy within natural history museums risks being overly metonymic. Traditionally its aim was to typify nature, to tell 'the single story, about nature's unity, the unblemished type specimen' (Haraway 1984: 34). The presentation of a species through the body of a single animal obscured the deaths – of more-than-humans but frequently humans themselves – that occurred to produce the specimen. Multiple lives were absorbed into one display mount. Poliquin divides taxidermy into eight distinct sub-genres, which include hunting trophies, preserved pets, and anthropomorphic taxidermy, such as the duelling squirrels and kittens in dresses produced by Victorian taxidermist Walter Potter (Poliquin 2012). She separates natural history specimens and extinct species, even though both are encountered within the museum space, perhaps because extinction taxidermy bears the weight of metonym even further. It becomes the only means by which we will encounter the physical body of a lost species – even if we are encountering a manipulated skin only. This comes particularly into play when there are a limited number of mounts and skins in existence: while there are over 1,500 passenger pigeons globally there are fewer than 200 paradise parrots. In the case of the Mauritius Blue Pigeon (*Alectroenas nitidissima*) which became extinct in the 1830s,

there are only three (Rothschild 1907: 163). Museums, as the stewards of these last remains and crafters of the narratives around them, thus have a privileged and vital role to play in communicating stories of extinction.

A taxidermy body in a natural history museum is representative of its species, but as with a singular bird in a flock it must be understood both as a type and an individual. Thom van Dooren (2014: 27) describes one bird as 'a single knot in an emergent lineage: a vital point of connection between generations'. The work that goes into building these generations is caused by the individual birds, making pair bonds, feeding, nurturing. A species is what van Dooren terms a 'flight way': 'a strand in a fabric [...] interwoven lines of intergenerational movement through deep history' (van Dooren 2017: 193). The paradise parrot specimens carry multiple histories: that of the whole parrot species, millennia of evolution; of the individual bird's life; of the manner, date, and arbiter of its death; and then of the specimen it became and will continue to become, travelling through continents, countries, store rooms, laboratories, hands. Too rare to be on display, many of their bodies will likely spend the rest of their existence in protected environments, seen occasionally by a student, researcher, or scientist, who has perhaps never visited the continent from which they originated. Yet these encounters, and the curators who look after the birds, bring their own meanings, ensuring that the parrots' flight ways will continue in some form even after the species itself is extinct.

Van Dooren writes on the need to 'inherit and inhabit the legacies of the past to shape possible futures' (van Dooren 2017: 188). Our legacies might include genetic material, landscapes, or historical events, and the stories we tell around them. Van Dooren asks what it means 'to inherit *responsibly*'; we might also ask what it means to leave an inheritance responsibly. For David Farrier, extinction pitches us 'into awareness of the richness of our inheritance from the deep past, and the depleted legacy we will leave to the deep future' (Farrier 2019: 92). Nonetheless, the legacy we do leave to the 'deep future' might have a more profound impact than we can imagine, as technological development enables us to derive increasing information from specimens. Museums are archives of the past, curating for present and future generations. Scientific analysis continues to take place on taxidermy paradise parrots. A 2019 study confirmed the bird's genetic diversity by successfully examining genome DNA, which had been extracted from the toepad of a bird collected in the second half of the nineteenth century (Irestedt *et al.* 2019: 3). The paper sought to highlight the value of museum collections 'as repositories of biodiversity across time', and how their historical specimens can contextualize the circumstances that lead to species extinctions (Irestedt *et al.* 2019: 1). I wondered whether DNA analysis would one day tie up the loose threads that I had uncovered: resolving where the Aberdeen bird had originated, if the Glasgow parrot had been an early specimen encountered by Gilbert, and whether the Liverpool parrot was indeed the holotype. One curator I met described curation as detective work; a form of resisting the descent into meaninglessness.

Interlude: the seventh parrot

February 2021. It is sixteen months after my visit to Aberdeen, following a year in which my access to museums has been greatly limited by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns across the United Kingdom. I get in touch with Hannah Clarke to check some details for my article. She is working from home, periodically carrying out building checks on the Zoology Museum, and has news. In 2020 the museum catalogued an Australian diorama case, ABDUZ:100043. The online description lists a kookaburra and budgie, as per the original 2007 press release, and references additional bird specimens: 'Others include two other Lorikeet/Parrot species'. The curator thinks that this includes a paradise parrot, as the case has not been opened. I feel doubtful. A week later she sends me three photographs. The case is wooden, a couple of feet high. In addition to the three large iridescent beetles arranged at the base of the diorama there are eight mounted birds, arranged at various positions upon a mossy branch. The bird in the top left-hand corner looks slightly pale, perhaps from the flash, and almost mournful, as though the taxidermist's positioning of the eye has not been quite right. As with the one-winged Aberdeen specimen, the inclusion of eyes makes me want to anthropomorphize. It is unmistakably a male paradise parrot.

Penny Olsen's catalogue of paradise parrot material in museum collections does not mention Aberdeen Zoology Museum. She lists twenty-eight specimens in UK museum collections, half of these in London's Natural History Museum, and the others in Liverpool, Manchester, Exeter, Norwich, Oxford, Glasgow, and Edinburgh. The three Aberdeen birds are a significant increase to the UK's total. In the twentieth century zoological collections went from being key places of study to marginalized and problematized, seen as sites that housed uncomfortable relics of a colonial past (Patchett *et al.* 2011: 123; Everest 2011: 84; O'Key 2021: 644). Yet as Patchett *et al.* (2011: 123) note, 'where some have found only stilled life, it is important to emphasize that there is *still* life'. Specimens offer opportunity for study, both as scientific resources and tools of cultural research (Everest 2011: 75). When the specimen in question is extinct, they have added significance, offering unique access to species that have otherwise vanished. The third Aberdeen paradise parrot specimen also revealed that museum collections are not in stasis; that the work of curators can continue to uncover even long-dead species. A few weeks after my contact with Hannah Clarke, I returned to the Zoology Museum's website. Specimen ABDUZ:100043 had been updated. The list of the case's eight different bird species was now complete, and included 'Paradise Parrot (extinct)'.

An absent presence

In an article for an Extinction special of the *Cultural Studies Review*, Kelly Enright compares the power of the monument to the passenger pigeon in Wyalusing, Wisconsin to the power of the taxidermy body of Martha, the endling, when she was displayed at the Smithsonian. Arguing that the monument is more successful for the way in which it situates the absence of the bird within a landscape, Enright contends that the bird's corporeal presence challenged the absence of the species, although there is contradiction in her claim that 'viewers could imagine away extinction even as they were faced with its glass-eyed gaze' (Enright 2019: 160). She writes only briefly of Martha's 2014-2016 public appearance, when she was displayed in an exhibition called *Once There Were Billions: Vanished Birds of North America*, curated by the Smithsonian Library. Jørgensen gives a fuller account of this display. Martha was mounted alongside a male pigeon, intended to signify a mate, who was offering her a seed in his beak. Alongside them was a third passenger pigeon, a skin as opposed to mount, lying belly up and with no eyes. For Jørgensen, it was this skin that 'embodied the death of the passenger pigeon' (Jørgensen 2019: 130). But rather than negate the fact of extinction, as these taxidermy bodies had for Enright, Jørgensen saw power in empathizing with a species that could almost be alive. The three pigeons were displayed against a backdrop of images that showed the large scale of passenger pigeon hunting. For Jørgensen, these images suggested the inevitability of the deaths of Martha and her 'mate' (Jørgensen 2019: 130). By playing on that notion of the 'lively double dead', the verisimilitude of taxidermy was used to effectively evoke the loss of extinction in the viewer.

Discussing how to represent climate change in museums, Cameron *et al.* argue that the museum sector's great tasks are to first inform the public on the science of climate change, and second to 'equip citizens with tactical knowledges that enable participation in actions and debates on climate change that affect their futures' (Cameron *et al.* 2013: 10). Arguably the public also needs an emotional trigger that will lead them to absorb the information and become involved in actions. It has been said that we will not save what we do not love, a quotation used by nature writers such as Robert Macfarlane to communicate the power of narrative and emotion during a time of great biodiversity loss.⁷ Extinction taxidermy, in contrast, gives us the chance to love what we did not save, offering no future solutions but acting as a warning of the consequences of environmental destruction. As Aldo Leopold reflected on the extinction of the passenger pigeon, 'to love what was is a new thing under the sun' (Leopold 1968 [1949]: 112). This love is learned through connections made with the animal, connections that may take place through knowledge of its history, habits, and cultural importance, or through staring into the glass eyes of its taxidermy form. The loss of extinction comes from that brief belief in the liveliness of the animal and the semblance of its gaze, followed by the knowledge that neither it, nor any other individual of its species, will ever again look back. Critically, in *Once There Were Billions*, a non-animate study skin was

brought into play, employing a form of taxidermy rarely seen by the public, and uncovering the reality of the animal's death that always lies behind taxidermy's artifice.

This artifice also disguises the slow process of decay taking place posthumously, even in a well-preserved and conserved animal skin. Specimens are not in stasis, although writing about taxidermy frequently focuses on its attempts to freeze the animal (Haraway 1984; Hauser 1998; Asma 2001). In reality, it is an animal-made-object (Fudge 2012; Aloï 2018), composed of skin that will naturally decompose. Taxidermy's inherent contradiction lies in the way that the liveliness of its skin allows decay to take hold (Poliquin 2012; Would 2021: 17). Fur and feathers will fall out. Fluid in wet specimens will evaporate and has to be carefully replaced. Noses and gums crack and need repainting. Taxidermy, like any archived object, is additionally vulnerable to ten forces within the museum space that may accelerate this decay: fire, water, pests, pollutants, light, temperature, humidity, physical force, dissociation, and neglect. Even the best-preserved specimen, one that lasts for centuries, will begin to lose its animality over time.

An obvious issue with taxidermy of extinct animals is its rarity and thus variable quality, which might prevent museums from putting it on display, particularly if the taxidermy in question is a study skin. But as illustrated by *Once There Were Billions*, it is not always necessary to use perfect taxidermy mounts when conveying a message around extinction. Jørgensen's view chimes with Sophie Everest's description of skins as being 'absolute in their deadness' (Everest 2011: 89); a feature that museums wishing to communicate the totality of extinction might wish to employ. O'Key notes the power of the Room of Endangered and Extinct Species (La Salle des Espèces Menacées et des Espèces Disparues) at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, where incomplete skeletons '[stand] in physical testimony to the fragmentation and irreplaceable losses of extinction' (O'Key 2021: 645). Bristol Museum's 2019 exhibition *Extinction Voices* highlighted biodiversity loss by covering their extinct and endangered taxidermy animals with mourning veils, and in doing so showed how museums working within budgets and funding cuts could utilize existing collections to curate exhibitions around climate change (O'Key 2021). Perhaps displaying specimens in a less-than-pristine state would be a fitting representation of the reality of extinction, where the quiet methods of decay, invisible to the naked eye, will slowly eat, fade, and dissolve the last remains of a species over time, even within the protected casing of a museum cabinet.

Conclusion

I began by asking whether our sense of the total loss of extinction is diminished by the physicality of stuffed animal bodies in store rooms around the world. I'd like to conclude by approaching this from the opposite angle, thinking not about how specimens might negate extinction but instead the work they do to make us face it. This works twofold. First, taxidermy offers proximity: animals can be viewed close-up and from different angles over a long period of time; we can look directly into the glass eyes of mounts, and on some occasions we can touch them. We are brought close to an animal's physicality. The effect that this encounter might have – the power of it – relates to our familiarity with the animal. It may be one we know well, such as a Eurasian magpie (*Pica pica*), where proximity enables us to appreciate detail, such as the iridescence of its feathers. It may be an animal which we are unlikely to see in the wild, such as a taxidermy Bengal tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*), enabling us to appreciate its size and reality better than through other media, such as wildlife documentaries. With an extinct animal, such as a taxidermy thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*), this encounter is additionally powerful for knowing that we will never see one live, and that any photographs or footage of the animal are finite. Moreover, the skin's materiality makes taxidermy a unique medium. An encounter with a taxidermy paradise parrot, even a study skin, is more powerful than an encounter with Jerrard's photographs of the bird, and not simply for being three-dimensional. We are not in the presence of a representation of the animal, but a part of the animal itself. In retaining DNA and being subject to decay, these now-monuments to extinction have a liveliness beyond any other reference to the animal that we encounter.

Second, Victorian taxidermy is an uncomfortable and necessary reminder of our colonial past: a British view of animals – in addition to people and land – as an exploitable,

expendable, and collectible asset. It is part of taxidermy's dark power that in our encounter with the remains of an individual's life we must face the attitudes, destruction, and killing that took place in order to give us such proximity. Rather than detracting from our sense of species loss, taxidermy of extinct animals affirms it. Seeing a lone taxidermy mount or skin within a museum setting – whether in a display case or a storeroom drawer – is a reminder of the animal's lack of presence in any meaningful sense: for the paradise parrot, its absence from the skies, its burrows, the grass.

Over the course of a year, I physically encountered the bodies of six paradise parrots. Our meetings were mediated by curators, and our skin met through gloved hands and polythene bags. Five of the six birds were eyeless: there was no illusion that they were looking back. I cannot untangle myself from the privilege or location that enabled me to come within reach of this extinct Australian species, even while it is unlikely I will ever be able to see the landscape in which the parrots lived and died. Taxidermy brought me face-to-face with the life of an individual bird, a strand in the species' flight way, and also with its death. When I held one, I felt both the loss of a single paradise parrot and the loss of a whole species, and the uneasy juxtaposition between the joy of seeing an extinct bird and knowing what act – and acts – had occurred to allow me to do so. More than that, the specimens brought the overwhelming longing that Poliquin (2012) and Jørgensen (2019) see as central to the power of museum specimens; a longing first to hold the dead bird without gloves, without a barrier, and then the impossible, unfulfilled longing to see one alive, even on a screen; to believe that somewhere, the paradise parrot still fully exists.

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Endnotes

- ¹ John Gilbert's diary entries from this period have been transcribed by Dr Clemency Fisher of Liverpool World Museum. 'Gores' refers to Ralph and George Gore's station on the Condamine River. Liverpool World Museum, <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/1844-sydney-darling-downs>, accessed 20 January 2021.
- ² These skins and mounts have been categorized by Penny Olsen: <https://www.nla.gov.au/pub/paradiseparrot/B1-Table.pdf>, accessed 6 March 2021.
- ³ The *Psephotellus* genus was first proposed by Gregory Matthews in 1913 (Matthews 1913). The parrots were first placed in *Platycercus* by Gould, then *Psephotus*.
- ⁴ <https://www.gbif.org/grscicoll/collection/225db9c9-16a8-47d4-a1a2-6940bb4a2da5>, accessed 22 February 2021.
- ⁵ Clemency Fisher, Emeritus Senior Curator of Vertebrate Zoology, World Museum Liverpool, personal communication, 20 February 2021.
- ⁶ In September 2019 an amateur palaeontologist discovered a toothed seabird fossil, *Protodontopteryx*, near Christchurch, New Zealand. He named it *Protodontopteryx ruthae* after his wife, Ruth. Along with species such as the *Gnathia marleyi* (a crustacean parasite named after Bob Marley), *Scaptia beyoncea* (a horse fly named after Beyoncé) and *Neopalpa donaldtrumpi* (a moth named after Donald Trump), there are more cynical uses of naming. In 2005, an online casino paid \$650,000 to name a new species of monkey found in Bolivia, the money used to raise funds for conservation. It became the GoldenPalace.com monkey, or the golden palace monkey; the specific part of its Latin name, *aureipalatii*, means 'of the Golden Palace'.
- ⁷ <https://www.thelostwords.org/authors/>, accessed 8 March 2021.

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Miranda Cichy is a doctoral student and writer at the University of Glasgow, whose poetry has been published in print and online, most recently in *Magma*. Her creative-critical thesis is concerned with anthropogenic bird loss during the age of the Sixth Mass Extinction, and how taxidermy specimens in both the visible and non-visible areas of museums enable us to bear witness to such extinction. Combining creative non-fiction, poetry, and art, her thesis aims to "flesh out" the fragile surface remains of these animals, exposing their individual stories alongside the history of 19th century taxidermy and its modern uses.