

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Historical Record of Night Parrot (*Pezoporus occidentalis*) from the upper Oakover River, Western Australia

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In a recent publication, Johnstone et al. (2026) provided a summary of information on Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis* from Western Australia. It listed the most plausible reports compiled from the literature and unpublished observations (G.M. Storr and R.E. Johnstone). Recently while searching for information on vertebrate collectors in Western Australia, I found correspondence between W.H. (Harry) Butler and Dr Dean Amadon of the Department of Ornithology, American Museum of Natural History, New York. In these letters to Amadon, Butler mentioned that the reports of Night Parrot by Mr Noel Ives in the *Western Australian Naturalist* (Ives 1971), were valid. Ives located what was probably a Night Parrot nest in a dormant tussock of *Triodia* about 16 km north-east of Balfour Downs in July 1970. Butler knew the author and had discussed records with Ives and Dr Glen Storr, Curator of Birds at the Western Australian Museum, before they were published.

In January 1972, Butler wrote to Amadon seeking funding of about \$2,000 USD for an expedition to the upper Oakover River and Rudall River with a focus to search for Night Parrots and to collect vertebrates to add to collections made previously, from the Durba Range (WA), for museum studies. The estimated \$2,000 would include all costs for a six-week expedition including fuel, food, supplies and a salary for Butler. In regard to the Night Parrot, Butler conceded that netting a bird, photographing and measuring would be desirable, however the Senior Warden for the then Department of Fisheries and Fauna indicated that a collected specimen would be of considerable value to the Department.

In May 1972, Amadon provided Butler with \$2,000 USD for an expedition to the Oakover River region to be carried out in August–September 1972. In a draft annotated bird list compiled by Butler after the expedition (Butler 1972) for the Oakover River-Rudall

River area under the entry for Night Parrot (page 5) he provides the following details:

‘Tracks were found south of the Rudall River, and a bird was flushed at dusk from triodia grass land just east of the Oakover River at Junction Well. This latter cannot be definitely said to be a Night Parrot, but it was larger than a Budgerygah, slightly smaller than a Cockatiel, rose swiftly in a curving flight about 7 ft above triodia and disappeared around a dune and in spite of the dusk I got the impression of a pale flash under the wing’.

Butler visited the area where Noel Ives found the nest and found tussock *Triodia* about 60 cm high and 90 cm diameter with small interspaces. Heavy seeding in the previous year was evident in the many dead seed heads on the plants. This area was an isolated patch of clump *Triodia* on sandy loam among the stunted *Triodia* of the darker more rocky surrounding areas. He also visited the area where Ives reported flushing the birds and noted that it was a large area of *Triodia* on a sand flat with occasional eucalypts. He mentioned in litt. that the *Triodia* is about 2 feet 3 inches (70 cm) high, about 3 feet (1 m) in diameter with open spaces between the clumps averaging 2 feet (60 cm). It is noteworthy that both reported areas were physically similar as were both of his possible sighting and track records mentioned above. Butler stated that this type of micro habitat is not frequent in the general area and would comprise possibly about 5% of total area. He spent a week in each possible sighting area and set mist nets over water and among *Triodia*. These caught nothing as his efforts were hampered by the constant strong winds.

Following the expedition, Butler again wrote to Amadon on 3 October 1972 in litt. listing his collection of specimens from the Oakover region that included 136 skins, 36 spirit specimens, 21 skeletons, one egg (identity unknown) and some parasites. In this letter he

notes ‘... As to the Night Parrot, I saw what I think was a specimen — at least it was a parrot but not one that I was familiar with. I also photographed tracks which I suspect, based on Aboriginal lore, are the tracks of this bird’.

In his draft report on the expedition to Amadon on 2 October 1972, Butler mentions that the prime purpose of his expedition was to determine the presence or otherwise of Night Parrots based on the reports by Ives in the *Western Australian Naturalist* (Butler 1972). His Junction Well camp (22.74°S, 121.17°E) was the nearest water to the nest reported by Ives and his Curran Curran Rock Hole site (22.52°S, 121.94°E) was the nearest water to his reported flushing of three birds from a *Triodia*. He went on to say that if Night Parrots still exist in the area, they are very shy and wary. Before he left the area, Butler met a number of local station people some of whom had lived in the area for 30 years or more and they noted that locally the Bourke Parrot is called the Night Parrot. Two individuals, however, could recall seeing what was possibly a real Night Parrot, both about 18 months–2 years earlier. This would coincide with the Noel Ives report.

Butler’s opinion was that the species was not extinct but was both rare and nomadic. His overall impression was that the birds are nomadic, cyclical and follow good seasons with particular emphasis on *Triodia* seed rather than water.

Writing again to Amadon on 18 December 1972 in litt., Butler mentioned that since his return from the Oakover River he received a letter from the station owner (Balfour Downs), a keen amateur bird watcher who spent some time with him, stating ‘... he has flushed two Night Parrots since the visit, both in the

Junction Well area. This gentleman knows Bourke Parrots and Mulga Parrots and Budgerigars and is quite convinced that what he saw was the elusive Night Parrot’. Junction Well is located within Balfour Downs station.

The literature and unpublished records contain numerous observations of Night Parrots including many possible or likely records that are difficult to assess many years later (Johnstone et al. 2026). These observations are not only plausible but provide some interesting background information on Night Parrots.

Harry Butler was one of the finest Australian naturalists, well-grounded in mammalogy, ornithology, herpetology and flora and this record of a Night Parrot adds important information on this species in the Pilbara.

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