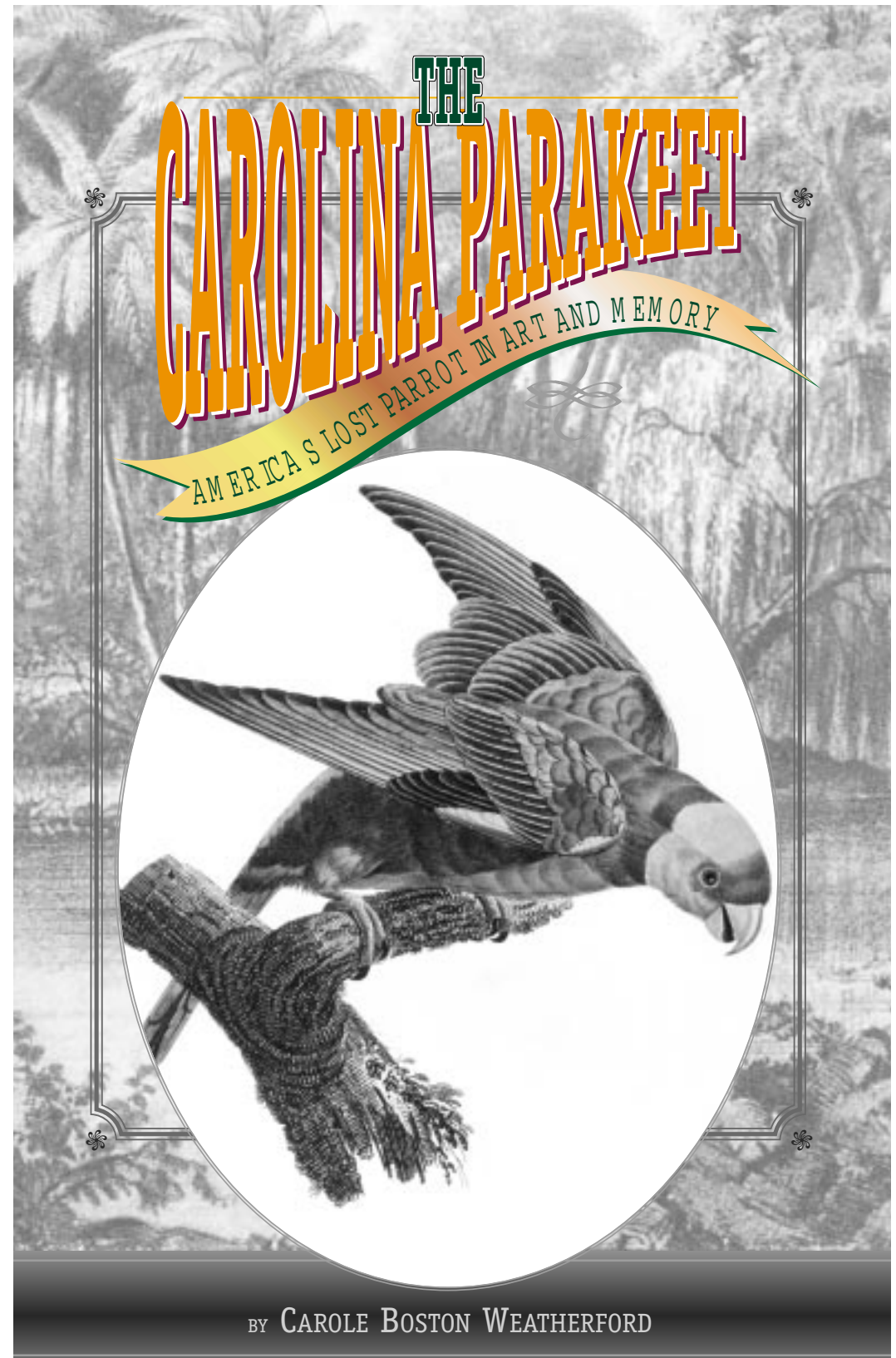




"Perruche à tête jaune" from Dictionnaire Universel d'Histoire Naturelle, 1835-1844, by Charles D. d'Orbigny. (Rare and Manuscript Collections, Karl A Kroch Library, Cornell University)



BY CAROLE BOSTON WEATHERFORD

Introduction

We have seen no bird of the size, with plumage so brilliant.

They impart a singular magnificence to the forest prospect, as they are seen darting through the foliage, and among the white branches of the sycamore.

*Timothy Flint in
The History and Geography of
the Mississippi Valley,
1832*

Many early settlers and naturalists wrote of the Carolina Parakeet in journals, diaries and natural histories. However, the knowledge we inherited about the species from these firsthand accounts is sketchy and anecdotal. The mysteries of the Carolina Parakeet could fill a book. The bird's courtship behavior is undocumented, as are its nesting habits, breeding season and territory, incubation period, rate of reproduction and longevity in the wild. Though several museums possess eggs collected from captive Carolina

Parakeets, not a single egg taken from the wild can be definitively categorized as that of a Carolina Parakeet.

These gaps are grievous, but understandable. The bird's green and gold plumage made it almost invisible amidst lush foliage in swamps, lowlands and deciduous riverbottom forests. And the birds roosted in hollows, hidden from the human eye. Ornithologists of the day were focused on collecting specimens rather than documenting life history and behavior. Thus, the species vanished from Earth before having been adequately researched.

This much is certain. There was once a gem in The Great Forest; a winged jewel rivaling any in the tropics. It was the Carolina Parakeet, North America's only native parrot. Curiously, within the span of a century, the great flocks dwindled to nothing, and this thing of beauty disappeared.

Now, it is almost forgotten. All that remain are romantic tableaux penned by pioneers, likenesses limned by artists, specimens cataloged in collections, and longing, wistful longing.

This is the sobering story of how a young nation loved, laid waste and lost its only parrot.



*"Le Perruche à tête jaune" by Jacques Barraband from
Histoire naturelle des perroquets, vol. 1.
(Ernst Mayr Library of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University)*

Great Flocks

In the Treasures Hall of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh, visitors linger at a glass case atop a pedestal. Inside are Carolina Parakeets, stuffed birds with plumage so vivid that even the most jaded onlookers are awe-struck. They ponder the specimens and read the accompanying description. Voices hush and the mood momentarily turns meditative. Then, youthful curiosity intervenes. "Does it still live in the forest?" a youngster chirps.

We wish. The Carolina Parakeet is extinct – a vanished



Carolina Parakeet exhibit at Museum of Natural Science, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. (Photo by Mark S. Hafner)

breed. But once, it painted the wilderness.

When European explorers reached North America, nature rolled out the welcome mat. Bamboo canebrakes spanning hundreds of miles. Sycamore seven feet around. And sylvan forests so boundless that some colonists claimed a squirrel could scamper from Maine to Mississippi without ever leaving the canopy.

Rivers and bays offered a bounty. Lobsters sometimes weighed in at twenty pounds, and many Massachusetts oys-



*"Southern River Scenery" by Currier & Ives.
(Printed with permission of Travelers Property Casualty)*

ters had to be sliced in thirds to be swallowed. Whopping catches were common. Native Americans easily spotted and speared colossal fish: trout as long as a man's arm, catfish outweighing a woman, and sturgeon six to nine feet long. There was no need to concoct fish stories.

From the skies, massive flocks of passenger pigeons – sometimes billions of birds strong and hundreds of miles long – blotted out the sunlight

European explorers glimpsed Native Americans spearing whopping catches. (Treasures of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Library Collection)





Flocks of passenger pigeons – sometimes a billion birds strong – shadowed the land for hours as they passed overhead. Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, July 3, 1875. (Collection of Garrie Landry)

and shadowed the land for hours, as if an eclipse. The early settlers were amazed by the abundant wildfowl. On a 1585 expedition sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh, Thomas Hariot observed several bird species, including "parats," on the Carolina coast.

Of a 1664 expedition, Commander William Hilton wrote, "We saw . . . in the woods . . . great flocks of parakeetos."

Colonial surveyor-general John Lawson also reported having seen "parrakeetos." While

his contemporaries were flocking to Rome, Lawson impulsively ventured across the Atlantic after a passing acquaintance assured him that Carolina was the best country he could visit. Upon reaching North America in December 1700, Lawson embarked on a two-month, 550-mile portage from Charleston, South Carolina, to present-day Waxhaw, North Carolina. He then trekked across North Carolina, ending at present-day Beaufort County. After eight years of similar travels, Lawson deemed

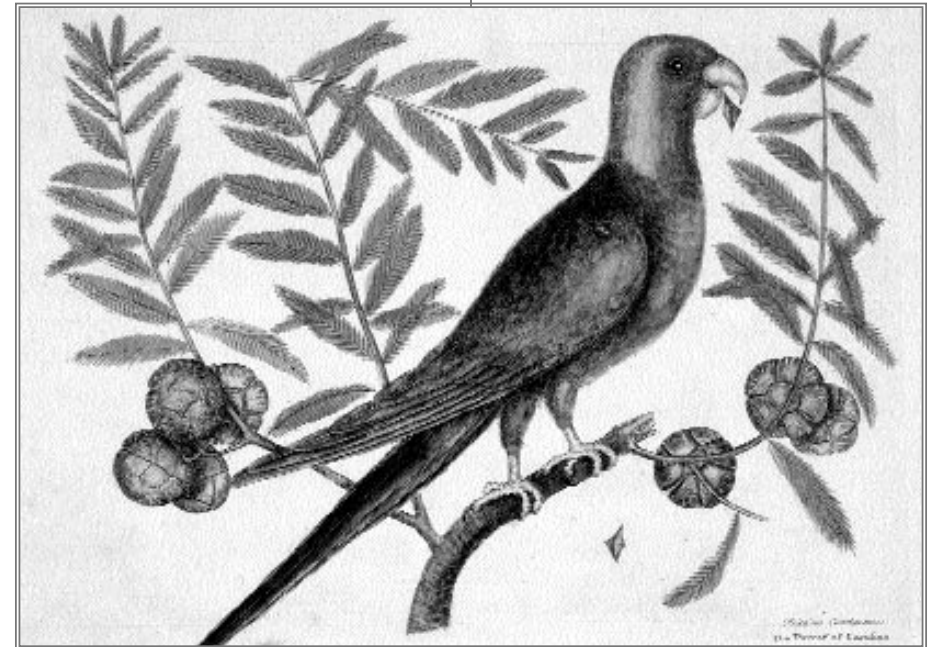
Carolina "as pleasant a country as any in Europe." In fact, he asserted that European flora and fauna paled in comparison to some American species. In his 1714 *Historie of Carolina*, Lawson ranked the parakeet among the American birds whose beauty surpassed those of Europe.

Hilton, Hariot and Lawson had seen the once plentiful

Wisconsin.

Naturalist William Strachey's 1612 *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* offered the first description of the species.

Parakitoes I haie seen many in the Winter and knowne divers killed, yet be they a Fowle most swift of wing, their winges and Breasts are of a greenish color



"Parrot of the Carolinas" by Mark Catesby, from *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands, 1731-1743*. (North Carolina Collection. University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill)

Carolina Parakeet, the only parrot native to the North America. The bird's range extended from Florida to Virginia, west to Texas and Colorado, and north to

with forked Tayles, their heades more Crymsen, some yellow, some orange-tawny, very beautifull...

English naturalist Mark Catesby provided the first sci-

This sight always reminded me vividly of a kind of Christmas tree which was used by the poorer families... only these enormous Christmas trees of the forest looked vastly more imposing than the little birch in the warm room.

Little wonder, then, that Native Americans used the bird's brilliant plumes for ornament. Much to the species' detriment, milliners and dress-makers also prized the Carolina Parakeet's luminous plumage. The feathers, and often dead birds, adorned women's hair, hats and gowns. Men also donned fedoras with feather trim. During two strolls in Manhattan in 1886, ornithologist Frank Chapman of the American Museum of Natural History spotted feathers from forty native bird species on 525 woman's hats. That year alone, the lavish fad claimed an estimated five million birds. By the turn of the century, hunters fetched \$32 per ounce for plumes. Though parakeet plumes were not the most coveted – heron aigrettes held that hapless title – the hat trade nevertheless thinned Carolina Parakeet flocks.

Natural history collectors,

seeking rarities for curiosity cabinets, also snatched up specimens: stuffed birds, skins and eggs. In the late nineteenth century, egg collecting – known as oology – became a national craze among scientists and hobbyists. A half dozen or so magazines were devoted to egg buying, trading and collecting. T. Gilbert Pearson, president of the Audubon Society from 1911 to 1937, was an avid egg collector as a youth. He shared this interest with boyhood friend Altie Quaintance. Together, the two boys, hunted, gathered and blew eggs. They exchanged eggs with each other and with collectors from afar.

In his autobiography, Pearson described this consuming passion. "We talked of eggs and we dreamed about them. We admired each other's eggs and quarreled about eggs. For months our lives were absorbed in the subject . . ."

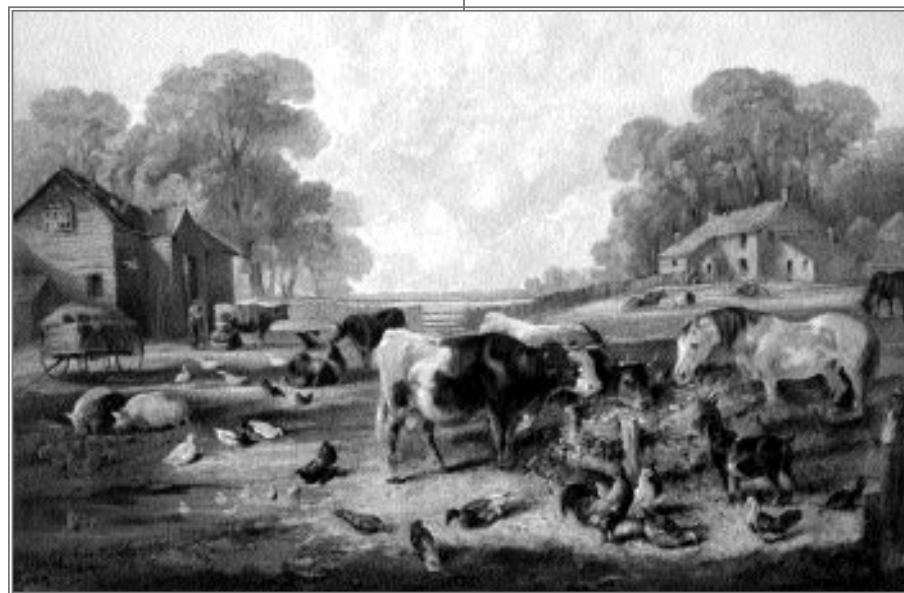
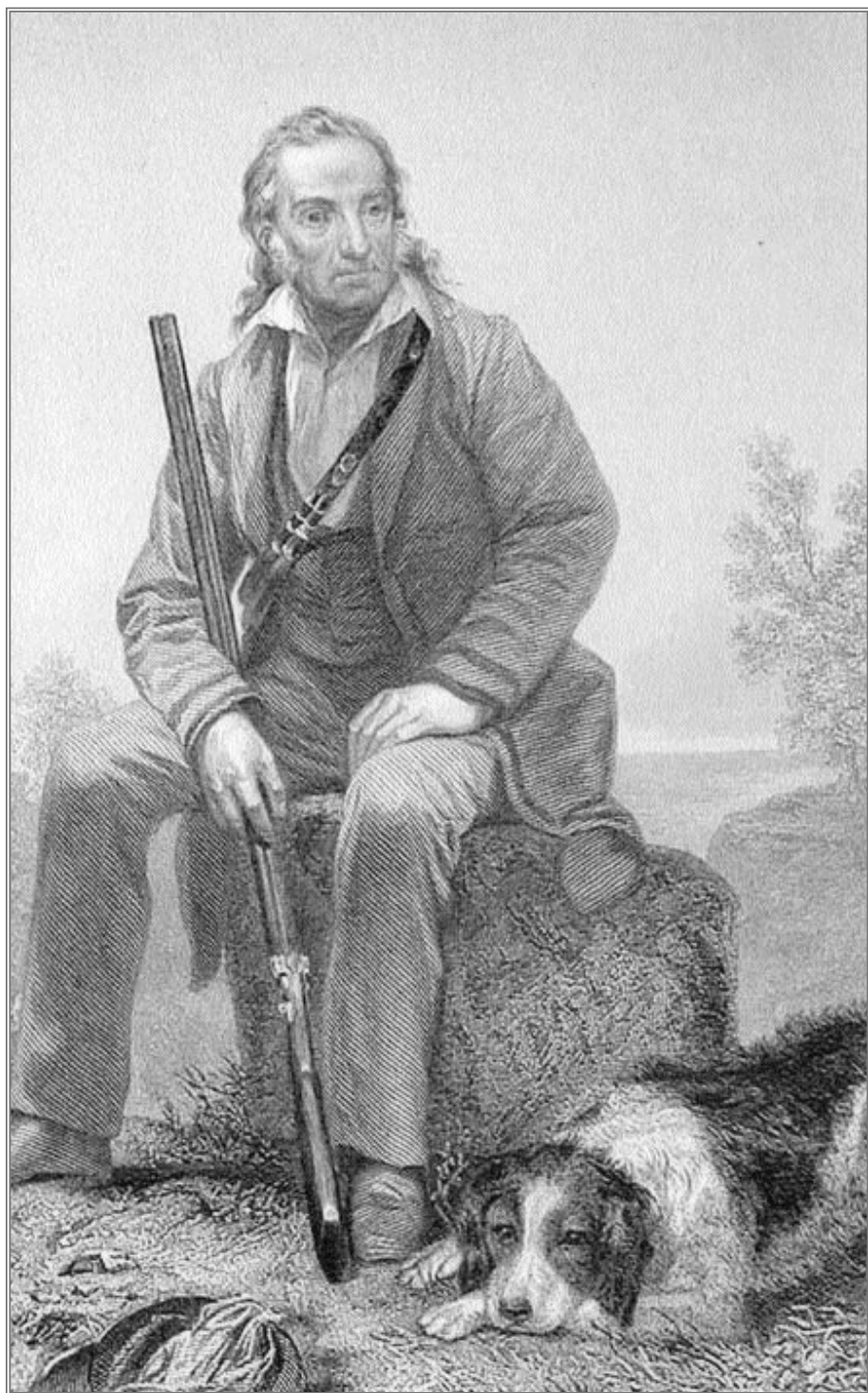
Countless Carolina Parakeet eggs were claimed by collectors. Further, ornithologists took eggs and shot birds in the wild

Woman with artificial birds adorning her hat and dress, c. 1902.

At the height of the feather fad, those birds might have been real.

(Library of Congress)





*When early settlers carved forests into farm,
Carolina Parakeets feasted on grain and kernels of fruit.
("American Farm Life" by Currier & Ives; Library of Congress)*

*shots, in order to make choice
of good specimens for drawing...*

Despite a tender heart, the creature had a destructive nature, Audubon surmised. "Nature seems to have implanted in these birds a propensity to destroy, in consequence of which they cut to atoms pieces of wood, books, and, in short, everything that comes their way."

The punishment may have outweighed the crime, however. Researchers have been hard-

pressed to find a farmers' almanac or agricultural history that declared the bird a scourge to crops. In the end, more birds may have been shot for sport than for revenge.

Though the bird was regarded by many as a pestilence, Audubon admired the Carolina Parakeet, nevertheless. He saw the bird's beauty as proof of the woodland's delights.

Naturalist and wildlife artist John James Audubon painted the Carolina Parakeet around 1825. (Johnson, Fry & Co., 1861; American Philosophical Society)