

# EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

## #12 Newton's Parakeet

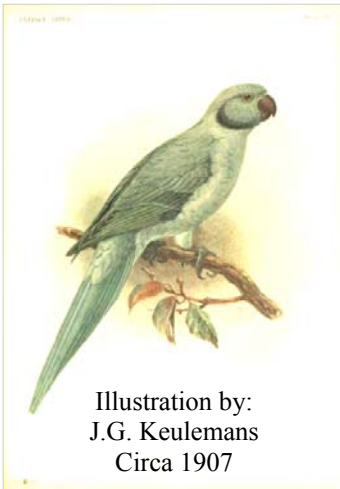
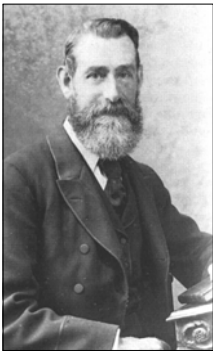


Illustration by:  
J.G. Keulemans  
Circa 1907

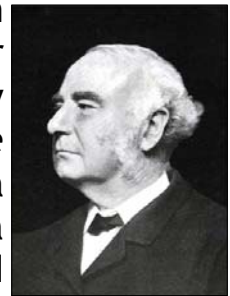
Newton's Parakeet, *Psittacula exsul*, was a parrot endemic to the forests of the island of Rodrigues, a dependency of Mauritius, in the Indian Ocean. It was of a bluish-greenish-slate grey colour, which is unusual for a member of the *Psittacula* genus, most members of which are predominately green.

The species epithet “*exsul*” (exiled), refers to the French Huguenot refugee François Leguat (see third to last paragraph), who first reported sighting the species. The last living bird was seen in 1875. Only two complete specimens survive. However, there are also various subfossil bones in existence.

Both complete specimens, one male and one female, are in the Cambridge University Museum. The female specimen was sent by Sir Edward Newton, a colonial administrator in Mauritius, to his brother, Alfred Newton, Professor of Comparative Anatomy at Cambridge University from 1866 to 1907, who officially described the bird in 1872. The male specimen was shot by a Mr. Vandorous in 1875, this is thought to be a juvenile from the colouration of the beak, and from the lack of a red patch on the shoulder of the wings.

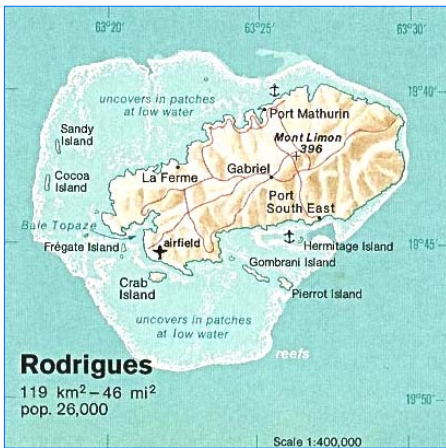


Sir Edward Newton  
1832-1897



Alfred Newton  
1829-1907

Newton's Parakeet was 40cm (16”) in length, with about half the length being the tail feathers. The general appearance was similar to other *Psittacula* species, including the black collar characteristic of the genus. However, the unusual plumage colouration was a darker grey blue on the upper surface than on the lower. The male had a dark line on its face running from the cere to the eyes. This was less prominent on the female, which had a greyer head, and the black collar was not as prominent as the male's, and did not extend to the back of the neck. Early travellers reported a red patch on the shoulder of the wings, a feature which is not seen on either of the two surviving skins, this indicates the male specimen is probably a juvenile. Some early reports state that green birds also existed, but whether there were two colour morphs, or the green coloration was only borne by newly-fledged young cannot now be established. Another possibility is that there was also an undescribed green *Psittacula* species on Rodrigues that passed into extinction unrecorded.



Map courtesy American CIA

Newton's Parakeet was first recorded by François Leguat, the leader of a group of eight French Huguenots who colonised the island of Rodrigues from 1691 to 1693. Leguat, described them as abundant and reported they fed mainly on the nuts of an olive-like tree. He stated they were good to eat and able to imitate speech. One bird tamed by them spoke both French and Flemish (Dutch). They took this bird with them when they finally left the island for Mauritius, but nothing is known of its eventual fate.

Another description is found in a report entitled *Relation de l'Île Rodrigue*, written by Julien Tafforet in 1726. It was also mentioned by the French mathematician Alexandre Pingré, who travelled to Rodrigues in 1761 to view the transit of Venus. He noted that the bird had by then become scarce.

The species' extinction was presumably caused by a combination of habitat loss and hunting.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia



**THE WISE OWL SAYS...**doves such as Peaceful, Diamond and Masked Doves don't present any problem as far as diet is concerned. They will do well and breed on the usual seed mix supplied for finches, and a supply of seeding grasses. However, the flimsy nests these species build can sometimes be of concern. Should the structure appear inadequately supported, it may be necessary to add a little extra material to ensure the nest doesn't collapse. Adding a few thin twigs, coarse grass leaves and stems will suffice to give the extra support required. Fortunately, most pairs can be persuaded to use a wire platform on which to build, and of course this would overcome the problem completely.

It is important to give birds protection from both heat and sun. The recent hot weather has been trying for both birds and humans. Whilst humans can to some extent avoid the extreme power of heat and sun, the birds must cope with the conditions provided for them. Every effort should be made to provide adequate shelter to protect them from the direct sun. Shade is important, but so is protection from radiant heat from the aviary material itself. An all iron shelter would be akin to an oven on a very hot day. An insulated ceiling, or at the very least, some shade cloth a few centimetres above the roof will not only make the birds more comfortable, but will help avoid losses through heat stroke.