

# FOR THE BIRDS

By WORDS by ANGUS FONTAINE

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## Conservation effort

On an immense cattle station in Far North Queensland, a big-hearted farmer and a team of dedicated scientists are saving Australia's rare and beautiful golden-shouldered parrot, one precious nest at a time.

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## Conservation effort

In a big country it's often the little creatures who get lost first. But on Artemis Station, a vast 125,000-hectare property on Cape York Peninsula teeming with cattle and crocodiles, one of the smallest residents was always the most famous.

To the first Australians this creature of singular beauty went by many names: alwal, thaku, armorrall, minpin. When scientists applied a genus, they called it *Psephotellus* from the ancient Greek *psēphōtos* meaning "inlaid with mosaic stones or jewels".

For centuries, this tiny gem lived on the edge of myth – known by all yet seen by few. By the time Sue Shephard arrived at Artemis, in 1970, photographers and poachers were swarming to find it. And the legend had a common English name: the golden-shouldered parrot.

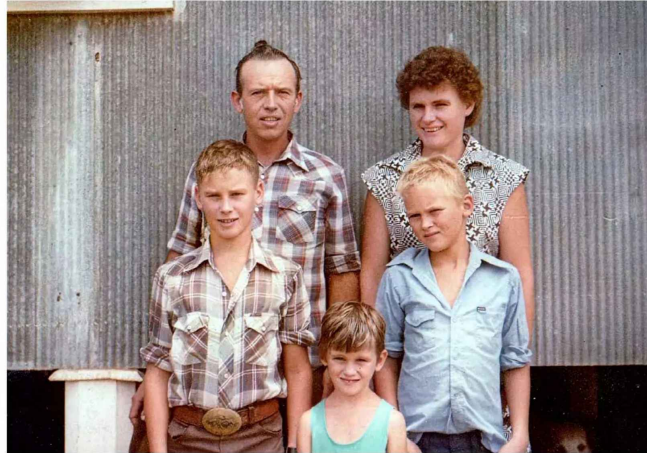
"I didn't really take notice the first time I saw one, it was just a flash of colour," admits Sue when *The Weekly* tracks her down after a weekend fighting flash fires on Artemis. "I'm not fanatical about birds but I like walking in the bush and not talking to anybody. It was when the poachers started coming for them that I looked closer. I got real wild."

With her steely gaze, short-cropped hair and dry laugh, Sue, 73, is a true force of nature.

Once, in the early '90s, she and her husband, Tom, found a poacher's cage full of parrots and sprang a jailbreak. Like an opal exploding in a blur of yellows, pinks and blues, the birds flew free. Sue has been fighting for golden-shouldered parrots ever since.

"These illegal poachers would get past any roadblocks and come onto the property to collect the chicks when they were ready to fly," Sue explains. "I hated the idea of them being taken from their parents and home here, and sold overseas to collectors."

Australia has one of the highest rates of animal extinction in the world, with an estimated



Above: Tom and Sue with their kids Tommy, Kerry and Trevor. Right: Sue and Tom with a termite mound, which golden-shouldered parrots use for nests.

9000 species lost since 1788. One of them was the golden-shouldered parrot's close relative, the "superlatively beautiful" paradise parrot last seen in 1927, likely extinguished by grazing, feral pests, poachers and non-Indigenous fire practices.

Sir David Attenborough called Cape York "the most extraordinary place on Earth" but when Artemis' 1992 flock of some 300 parrots plummeted to about 50 by 2022, Sue sounded an urgent SOS. The family's herd of 4000 cattle was radically altering the ecosystem, degrading the soil and reducing the rich native grasses the birds fed on.

"At first, the birds and the cattle got on really well together, because the parrots fed in the shorter grass," says Sue. "But as the health and size of the herd improved and the fenced paddocks got bigger, up to 50 square kilometres or more, the birds took a downturn."

It's a challenge familiar to many



Australian pastoralists, says ecologist Steve Murphy. "Sue and Tom have raised their family here and they continue to earn a livelihood with the cattle that are changing the land. So she's conflicted. Luckily, Sue loves these parrots and she's got a moral code that compels her to help and protect them."

Steve runs Conservation Partners, a not-for-profit firm that offers private landowners scientific and operational support. Since 2019, he and Sue have deployed a unique blend of bush wisdom and innovation to turn Artemis Station into a golden-shouldered parrot stronghold.

"Sue's knowledge of the species on Artemis is without peer," says Jaana Dielenberg of the Biodiversity

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Council. “Without her decades of devotion, these birds may have vanished altogether. But Steve brings the science and stages the interventions.”

Those interventions include ‘resetting’ the ecosystem. “I close my eyes and go back in time,” Steve tells *The Weekly* with a grin. “I try to remember a world when this little bird was thriving, an ecology before the impact of predators and humankind.”

Back to when Captain Cook landed at Cape York in 1770 to repair the Endeavour. The 48 days he spent on Guugu Yimithirr land south of Artemis was likely the first prolonged contact between Europeans and Aboriginal people. There’s little doubt both would’ve been awed by sky tides of technicolour birds zipping through the air.

As was Sue when she arrived in 1970,

a tough teenager from Herberton (current population around 895) on the Atherton Tablelands. “My family farmed grapes, apples and oranges and also ran a tin mine,” Sue explains. “But I first came up to Cape York to be a station cook. I’m not a town person at all. I’d rather go fishing or be out in the bush on my own.”

Artemis Station was named for the Greek goddess of animals and protector of girls, and sits on Kuku-Thaypan and Olkola country. Tom Shephard’s father, Fred, acquired the land from Queensland’s Postmaster-General’s Department in the 1930s. Artemis was part of a 2350-kilometre estate that included Lilyvale, Mary Valley and Musgrave.

Sue worked at the latter – a family home, post office and overland telegraph station. “I wasn’t looking for a husband, but I found one!”

she laughs. “Well, my mother-in-law found him for me. All three of her sons married girls who came to work there.”

What was it that made her fall in love with Tom?

“Dunno,” Sue twinkles. “I often wonder!”

Sue became a mother at 18, raising two sons and a daughter at Artemis. “I was a young mum, so I had a good time growing up with them. It was a great life. We had no house and lived in a swag most of the time, moving between mustering camps.

“If the kids weren’t on horses helping, I’d make them do school with me at home,” says Sue, “but mostly they were out mustering or pinching turtle and crocodile eggs with the Aboriginal kids. They’re no geniuses but they’re good kids who know a lot.”

In Cape York, survival is the only lesson worth learning anyway. "There's a few ways to die out here, mainly crocodiles, coming off a bike or getting hit by a bull," Sue explains.

Today, their son Trevor runs Artemis' cattle operations while Tommy and Kerry come home to help with musters, leaving Sue more time for her beloved parrots. For the past five years, she and her team have poured their heart and soul into them.

"They're secretive little birds but I get close to them with the binoculars," Sue says. "It's lovely to watch them nesting. They're really good parents. The mother usually does the nesting while the male is a decoy, standing guard and chirping updates."

**S**ue worked with Professor Stephen Garnett and Dr Gay Crowley to map the vegetation at Artemis. Paperbarks had flourished as cockatoo grasses had foundered so they began clearing woodland and restoring Indigenous fire practices.

"Too many trees had invaded the birds' natural open habitat," explains Steve. "It meant they couldn't see ambush attacks from predators. I thought, 'Ok, one thing Queenslanders are good at is cutting down trees', so Sue and I made that happen."

"Then it was food – helping the perennial grass seeds these birds love to flourish."

Fire management is critical to helping the native spear grass and plume sorghum seeds thrive. Although Tom and Sue are respected in local Indigenous communities, the ancient art of 'cool burning' to shape and nourish Cape York country had been missing from land management. "So much knowledge has been lost by so many," says Steve.

Steve sowed seed and cleared while Sue destocked cattle from 2200 hectares of Artemis and drove out feral pigs and cats. But still the parrot's predators kept coming, striking at the nests in those crucial weeks before the baby chicks became adults. "In 2023, we were finding



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every nest empty," says Steve. "Sue and I were despairing."

Unlike most of Australia's other 56 parrot species, golden-shouldered parrots live in termite mounds, burrowing in to build nesting tunnels. These imposing towers help protect from lightning fires that often hit Cape York, while termite colonies keep nest temperatures regulated. Unfortunately, being close to the ground leaves nests open to raids by snakes and goannas.

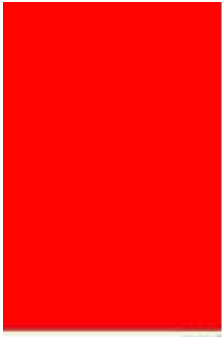
"By then, there were maybe only 50 birds left on Artemis," says Steve. "We had to do more to address that decline and eradicate predator threats, because we estimated around

33 per cent of nests were going to be successful unless we intervened. But if we could supplement their food and protect their nests, 76 per cent of chicks would make it."

Sue and Steve took on a protégé, Pat Webster, a moustachioed conservation officer, and started the Artemis Nature Fund with grants, donations and carbon credits.

"The big breakthrough was the electric fences," says Pat. "We started wiring the termite mounds. The snakes and goannas couldn't get in and every nest was successful!"

Steve has now stepped away and left Pat embedded with Sue and Tom to



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oversee the rescue mission. “Sue is still the hero – softly spoken and no bullshit, always calling it how she sees it and gilding no lilies – but Pat has become like a son to them,” says Steve.

Pat blushes, but the bond between the young conservationist and old cattle queen is clear. “I love it out here,” he says. “Yes, it’s a very beautiful looking parrot but it’s also Sue and the landscape they share. Tropical savannas

are incredibly beautiful and working on the property with Sue and her family is hugely enjoyable and rewarding.”

Helping the parrots survive to adulthood is one marker for success. The other is helping them live longer. “We’re now adding twice as many birds to the population,” says Sue. “But we’re also seeing more parrots return to the same places to nest.”

Once Sue locates a mating pair establishing a nest, Pat swoops in with a fence.

One parrot, called Black Black, has returned year on year since 2020. A male with

**Left and below: Tom and Sue have worked with scientists over decades to protect the parrots on their land. Opposite: Eighty new parrots have joined the Artemis population in the past two years.**

stunning plumage and deep devotion to his mate, he shot to global fame in 2022 when the BBC filmed him for *Planet Earth III*. Alas, he also lost his wife, Red Red, that year and then his offspring were tragically attacked and eaten by tree snakes in 2023 and '24.

In the 2025 wet season, Black Black’s luck changed, and so did that of his species. He found a new partner and fledged three chicks at the ripe old age of eight. Sue says it was a “turning of the tide”, and in the past two years, 80 new parrots (45 in 2024, 35 in 2025) have been added to the Artemis population.

Today, flocks of more than 30 birds, mostly juveniles, are a common sight at Artemis. So is Sue, trundling around on her quad bike, binoculars in hand, protecting her flock.

“Every day during the breeding season over autumn I’ll watch them feed and fledge their babies,” she says. “And when they all fly off together in a big happy mob, I like that.” **AWW**



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