

The lost birds

An ambitious art project, a political scandal and two hundred bird paintings that went missing for a decade... the tale of *Birds of Tasmania* is as unlikely as it is intriguing. Finally published 30 years on, *Natasha Harris* finds that questions still remain. Where is the Swift Parrot?



Each of Susan Lester's paintings was eagerly received by Edmund Rouse—his son recalls him marvelling that they looked as though they could "fly off the page". Yellow Wattlebird (above), Blue-winged Parrot (right) and Forty-spotted Pardalote (far right)

In a television interview with Susan Lester in the late 1980s, shortly after she was commissioned to paint 200 of Tasmania's birds, she sounds fairly quiet, unassuming, though with perhaps a hint of excitement about the project ahead. Asked what it means to her, she responds "A lot of work. It will be four years' work. It's a big project." This seems a peculiarly Australian understatement, both in tone and meaning, and somehow appropriate for the artist at the heart of this curious story of ego, politics, the Tasmanian logging industry... and birds.

The commission for a book commemorating Tasmania's birds, to be published by media magnate Edmund Rouse as a way to celebrate the 150th anniversary of his newspaper, *The Examiner*, was a life-changing opportunity for the young Susan Lester. A self-taught painter, she had achieved enough success by 1987 to catch Rouse's attention, and with eminent Tasmanian ornithologist Bob Green engaged to write the text, Lester began work in 1987.

She drew on both museum specimens ("they're very, very good for getting close feather detail and colours") and live birds in creating her paintings, and her son vividly remembers when "a couple of owls came to live with us" and seeing their glowing eyes peering down from the curtain rails in the darkened living room. The Galah Lester depicted was their own pet, an animal she had rescued from a fire. She spent time researching each bird and watching them in the field, and collected samples of trees and vegetation so she could depict each bird in a typical habitat.

While Lester hoped to secure her artistic career, and move permanently from her work at the Royal Hobart Hospital, it was not to be. Somewhat ironically, it was the growing strength of the movement to protect the very habitat Lester was carefully depicting in each painting that triggered the end of the project Rouse had begun. In 1989, Rouse attempted to bribe a Labor MP to keep the pro-logging Liberal Premier in power, in what became the biggest political scandal in Tasmanian history. As chairman of Gunns, the Tasmanian timber company that ran pulp and saw mills in the state and elsewhere, and became the largest woodchip exporter in the southern hemisphere, Rouse aggressively fought conservation policies that sought to limit native forest logging. His bribery attempt failed, and he went to prison.

Notes from Dr Bob Green documenting his ongoing exchanges with Rouse after his arrest show at least a verbal agreement that the project would be finished, and like Lester, Green was counting on significant royalties as his main payment for the work. Lester continued her work, and delivered the paintings (roughly one a week) to Rouse's son, David. But on his release, Rouse determined the project was not financially viable, thus ending the years of work.

Lester's son, Ben, recalls the scrapping of the project to be "fairly soul-destroying for her". In an attempt to receive some of the promised payment for her work, she sought legal advice and "fought a few battles", but after some struggle she let it go. Her artistic plans shelved, she returned to radiography at the Royal Hobart Hospital, and didn't paint seriously for a long time.



Then the paintings disappeared.

Their whereabouts remained a mystery until 1999, when they surfaced in a back room at the WIN television studio, the company which had bought many of Rouse's assets following his arrest. The 200 paintings were donated to the Tasmanian

Museum and Art Gallery. All, that is, except one: the Swift Parrot was missing.

Lester was relieved when the paintings showed up in good condition, but "the fact that the Swift Parrot was missing gnawed at her". She attended an exhibition organised by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, but afterwards, maintained her silence on the topic of the book, the disappointment that had ended her hopes of an artistic career too great. She died at the beginning of 2022 after a sudden illness, and her family decided it was time to finish what she had begun over three decades before.

They had a stroke of luck in finding Bob Green's original text in a drawer at Susan's house; Green had died in 2013, and this single hard copy was the only one remaining. After raising some money, the family approached Outside the Box, a group working at the intersection of arts, the environment and justice, for help in publishing the book. They engaged BirdLife Tasmania's Eric Woehler to edit the text and write an introduction, and in May this year the *Birds of Tasmania* finally took flight. Featuring 114 full-page plates and 86 half-page over 320 pages, the book itself is a work of art, with a beautiful binding and gilt-edged pages. In the finished book, the Swift Parrot is depicted by a silhouette, taken from a photograph that is the only remaining trace of the original painting.

The missing Swift Parrot—a bird now Critically Endangered, largely due to loss and degradation of habitat through land clearance—is almost too perfect a symbol for the paradox at the heart of this story: that the chairman of the logging company that turned so much of Tasmania's native forests into woodchips sought to commemorate the very birds he was displacing. By 1996, following a decade of expansion by Gunns, nearly half of all wet eucalypt native forests in Tasmania had been clear-felled—the very forests Swift Parrots rely on for breeding. On the mainland, where they feed, it's been a similar story.



The book includes an assessment of the conservation status of the birds illustrated, with the Swift Parrot among the 41 species listed as threatened. Many, like the Forty-spotted Pardalote, are the victims of the same loss of habitat that has driven the wild population of Swift Parrots down to just 300 birds. Proceeds from the sale of *Birds of Tasmania* will be dedicated to bird conservation: in a strange way, bringing the story of the book full circle.

We don't know what Susan imagined as she painted each bird, faithfully rendering detail, colour and shape. She certainly didn't expect what happened. But perhaps, publishing her work now, with the added resonance of what transpired in the last three decades and the urgency of the extinction crisis, lends it a poignancy and complexity that makes it all the more powerful.

With the original print run now fully sold, *Birds of Tasmania* will be reprinted in time for Christmas. To order your copy of this beautiful celebration of Tasmania's birds, go to outsidethebox.org.au/projects/birds-of-tasmania.

Help us save the Swift Parrot! Head to birdlife.org.au/campaign/save-swift-parrots/ to add your voice to our campaign.