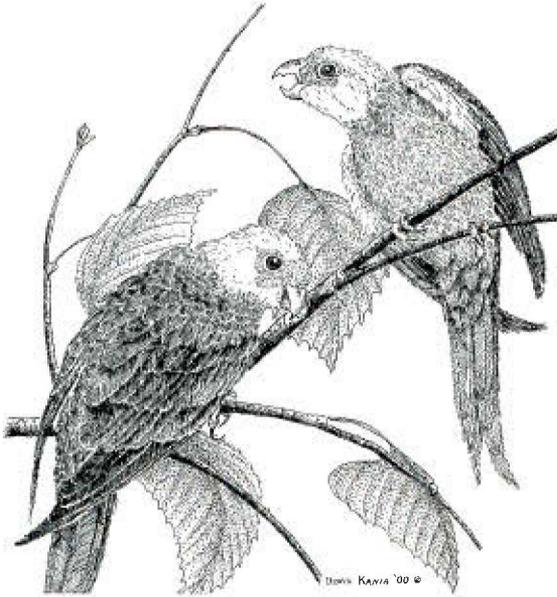


# Birding in the New Millennium

An Essay by Christine Williamson



## THE CAROLINA PARAKEET: GONEFOREVER

*Denis Kania drew the cover illustration of the extinct Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*), once a common resident in southern Illinois and fairly common farther north. The boldly colored yellow and green bird nested and roosted in hollow trees, particularly sycamores, according to H. David Bohlen's "The Birds of Illinois" (1989). The state's final record came from the Lake Michigan shoreline near Chicago on 11 June 1912, according to Arthur Cleveland Bent's Life history series. The bird became extinct, in part, due to its habit of remaining in the vicinity of hunters even as they shot at the species. A lack of knowledge about the bird, both by people and ornithologists of the day, also probably led to its demise. Though we know much more now about birds and habitat today, the Carolina Parakeet symbolizes an important and timeless lesson: we don't yet know it all. The science of restoration is young. Our careful consideration is needed as we work to protect birds and their habitats.*

— Sheryl DeVore

You still have time to resolve to improve your birding life in the new millennium (remember that it doesn't officially start until next year). But bear in mind two certainties: Nothing ever changes and nothing stays the same. Like all bird watching humans before you, over the next 100 years (and younger readers may well have that much time ahead of them) you will want to see more birds, closer, in greater detail and in more comfort than you can today. You will bemoan that bird numbers and species are decreasing; in short, you will long for the good old days of the 1980s and 1990s.

It was the same in the 1790s when New Englanders complained they saw fewer turkeys strutting around, and the hunting of game birds was first regulated. What will change are the creature comforts that will allow you to achieve your twin goals of pumping up your life or state list and being comfortable while you do it. Technical advances in optics, video, computer hardware, software and CD-ROMs, clothing, foot gear, bird-feeders, communications, travel, hearing aids, K to 12 environmental education programs, and even medical advances like Celebrex for arthritic joints, will get people out in the field birding younger and keep them out there to a truly advanced age.

## The past informs the future

To predict what birding in the new millennium will be like, it's useful to take a quick look backward at the history of bird watching in North America. One thing is certain. American birders in the 21st century will never see sights such as this description of Passenger Pigeons by New Englander, William Woods, in about 1630: "I have seen them fly as if the Ayerie regiment had beene Pigeons; seeing neyther beginning for ending, length, or breadth of these Million of Millions."

No matter how far they travel around the globe, only a tiny number of new millennium birders will be privileged enough to find an undiscovered bird species or to explore uncharted territory. As Jeff Greenwald wrote in the millennium issue of *Sierra* magazine (January/February 2000): "A planet that was for millennia untamed - defined by infinite unknowns, pristine wildlands, and indigenous cultures - now seems obsessed with universal accessibility." Certainly birders like the notion of accessibility - the ability to access even very remote places quite easily in order to see birds. But what will be missing in the next 100 years and beyond is the feverish dedication of the earliest cataloguers of North American birds - Alexander Wilson, John James Audubon, Mark Catesby, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Smith Barton, Lewis and Clark and others - who first found, named, shot, drew, etched, engraved, and described the distribution and