

SO  
NIGHT PARROT  
STORIES  
SOUTH AUSTRALIA



A FILM BY ROBERT NUGENT

PRODUCED BY MITZI GOLDMAN  
LOOKING GLASS PICTURES

Film length 89 min. 5.1 Audio mix. 16:9.  
Available on DCP.

[www.nightparrotstories.com](http://www.nightparrotstories.com)





*Eggs of the Night Parrot laid in captivity in England in 1861.  
The mother died of a cold.*

# SYNOPSIS

## ...THERE ARE STRANGE HELLS IN THE MIND THE DESERT MAKES

Somewhere in the remote deserts of Australia lived an elusive nocturnal bird called the Night Parrot. Virtually nothing is known of its ecology. It disappeared at the end of the 19th Century. Searching for evidence of its existence became a preoccupation. Night Parrot Stories was filmed in all the locations where Night Parrots once lived, during a time when stories of extinction were everywhere.

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

ROBERT NUGENT

Some years ago I set out to make a film on the Night Parrot, a rare nocturnal desert dwelling bird. It had not been seen for over 80 years and was thought by many extinct. In the course of filming the locations where the Night Parrot had once been seen, the bird miraculously reappeared, making front page headlines around the world. I was happy for the Night Parrot, but I thought its rediscovery spelt an end to my film project. The bird was not a winged Thylacene, living some inferred existence. Science, funded by Capitalism, stepped in to take over the narrative of the Night Parrot - the folk who found the bird were paid by a large mining company to do secret research and I had no access to the story of its resurrection.

There is something bothersome about such dominant narratives. In the case of the Night Parrot it was a story charged with testosterone and framed by uncertainty. I found I could not let her story go at that, though surely it now had its dramatic ending. A beloved lost object had been found. But to whom was it to be returned?

We are now four years later and these days this is what happens when you make a film on such a creature. Night Parrot Stories presents a range of different perspectives and ethnographic approaches. I hope to have done justice to some of the neglected narratives from the interconnected worlds I encountered in the desert...places and people at the margins of modernity, but I believe they are central to the story of the Night Parrot and her significance for all of us.

The geography of the Night Parrot's story I came to think of as a trick of time. There is a journey to and from the desert, and to and from places where knowledge is created, maintained, or lost, in so many different ways. During research and production I read Dal Stivens' "A Horse of Air", which is a supposedly fictional account of a man driven mad by his search for the Night Parrot. The poetry of John Kinsella and Dorothy Porter, as well as Shakespeare's "King Lear", Eliot's "The Wasteland" and Sean O'Brien's translation of Dante's "Inferno" came along for the ride. For music I listened to Chopin's Nocturnes because they pay homage to the night. Chopin was a fellow insomniac.

All these things somehow made their way into the film. Even the static of current events, heard periodically when I passed through intermittent coverage, makes an appearance. So perhaps it is not surprising that my gaze becomes fraught. I found myself staring intently at a plaque which marked a particular point in time and an obscure passing. What lay beneath these places and contemporary situations that the Night Parrot lead me to? I hope I have relayed aspects of the Night Parrot's story that have been marginalised by the haste to lay claim, name and memorialise. And drawn some connections that may have been overlooked. By the end of filming, through the years 2013 and 2014, in all the mainland states of Australia and across Europe, there was nothing that I could not, in some way, connect to the presence or absence of that bird lost in the darkness. Into everyone's life a Night Parrot comes in some form.

*Robert Nugent*

# PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

MITZI GOLDMAN

This is the third film I have produced with Rob Nugent. Each one has taken me into a world I knew nothing about and, to be honest had little interest in initially. The first one, *End of the Rainbow*, is a wonderful feature documentary that follows a gold mine as it is dismantled bolt by bolt, and shipped from Indonesian Borneo to Guinea West Africa. The film's journey opens up a world of gold, greed, poverty and poetry. It is filled with insights into the beauty, tragedy and absurd moments of cultural exploitation. The film travelled to over 20 international festivals and picked up 8 international awards. A new voice in cinema was discovered.

The second film, *Memoirs of a Plague*, took us back into an internal exploration of Rob's past life as a locust hunter. I never would have imagined that I would come to be interested in, and even care about, a locust. Rob used to exterminate them. Now he was singing an ode to their phase changing peculiarities and marvelling at their shift from solitary to swarm behaviours. Instead of killing with useless and damaging pesticides, his environmental plea was to recognise that locusts since pre-history come and they go. To honour nature and to acknowledge the contribution human's have made to destroying it, we have paved the way for the plagues of pestilence – and this film is a plea to just let nature be.

And now *Night Parrots* – is this a mythical creature from Rob's imagination? Will we find and see the parrot in the film, asks the commissioning editor?

Well, no, not exactly, but maybe, it depends what you're looking for. Rob's films are always a search into an unknown world, that begin with me drifting from vague disinterest to irresistible curiosity. Where might this take us? What is the story or is it a meander through uncharted lands? We get lost and then we find unexpected treasures. Nothing is predictable in Rob's films, the connections and observations are always absurd, unexpected, funny, tragic and overall magical. They always amount to more than the sum of their parts, a greater reality. Rob Nugent offers us a profound and unique vision and voice.

*Mitzi Goldman 2016*

*Producer, Looking Glass Pictures Pty Ltd*

# THE FILM MAKERS



*Robert Nugent,  
Director*

## ROBERT NUGENT, DIRECTOR/WRITER/CINEMATOGRAPHER/ SOUND RECORDING

Rob is a Canberra based film maker whose enquiries often document local and global situations bumping into the non-human world. His films employ and critique various documentary forms. His last three films came out of expeditions to remote locations in Indonesia, Guinea, Iraq, Ethiopia, Egypt, Tanzania and Australia. His 2007 film, 'End of the Rainbow', won international film awards and screened in Europe and the US. He directs and shoots, but not necessarily in that order. He came of age when he discovered the 'Canberra School' of film making. Before that he was just making it all up. He also likes chickens...in fact most birds.



*Hilary Balmond,  
Editor*

## HILARY BALMOND, EDITOR

Hilary Balmond is a freelance Editor whom from the tranquility of her edit suite and utilising the wonders of the internet, she cuts television shows, feature documentaries and community projects in collaboration with directors and other editors in the big smokes. Most recently her editing credits include Life on the Reef (ABC1 Eps 1-3), Once Upon a Time in Carlton (SBS1), Once Upon a Time in Punchbowl (SBS1), Move It Mob Style for ABC3, A Common Purpose directed by Mitzi Goldman and winner of the Showtime Movie Channel Audience Award for No.1 documentary at the Sydney Film Festival June 2011 and Emergency Bikers for Channel 5 in the UK.

Prior to concentrating her career on editing, Hilary enjoyed many years making short films showcasing the work of community groups and performing arts practitioners. This stems from her work as Stage Manager of events and theatrical productions both in Australia and the UK. In her travels, Hilary was commissioned by London and Moscow based travel companies, to create promotional films for independent travellers wishing to explore the Scottish Highlands, Russia, Mongolia and China.

She has also been able to assist students at Sydney Church of England Girls' Grammar School from concept to completion of their own short films. Hilary has



also worked with Sprout Media By Kids teaching filmmaking and has seen first hand how empowering this type of film making can be for the kids involved.

Hilary has a wonderfully supportive and creative partner who is also a great cook, two amazing young daughters and she hopes to have some chickens soon too.



*Mitzi Goldman,  
Producer*

## MITZI GOLDMAN, PRODUCER

Mitzi has been making documentaries her entire working life. First an assistant editor, then writer, editor, director, producer – anything to do with framing up the real and weird world we inhabit, trying to make sense of it in all its wonderful madness. Endlessly curious and chronically taking on too much, alongside her small but beloved production company, she runs the Documentary Australia Foundation which enables filmmakers to access philanthropic funding to make social impact documentaries happen and make the world a better place.



*Sam Petty,  
Sound Designer*

## SAM PETTY, SOUND DESIGNER

Sam is a sound designer who lives in wondrous location on the shores of the Pacific Ocean (unbelievably his studio is not in Sydney), where he produces aural sculptures for film connoisseurs and cinephiles internationally. He brought his experience of many long years, crafting sound for all sorts of film projects, to bear on the Night Parrot. Do listen up and enjoy a craftsman and artist at work. Other recent works of Sam can be heard in films such as *Animal Kingdom* (2010), *The Rover* (2014) and *Lore* (2012).



# PARRATOLOGY

## WHY MAKE A FILM ON THE NIGHT PARROT?

Four years ago an ornithologist friend gave me a book by Dal Stivens called “A Horse of Air”. It is the story of a supposedly fictional character, one Harry Craddock, who goes on an obsessive search for the Night Parrot. He relates his story to his psychiatrist from a mental institution - it is implied he has been driven mad by his search. I had heard of the Night Parrot before reading the book. When ever you mention the Night Parrot to folk interested in birds, ecology and the history of Central Australia you will receive an immediate reaction. Perhaps not as mad as Harry Craddock’s but certainly there is a wide and varied interest in this creature. It has now achieved a mythical status (it is called a ‘grail bird’ by twitchers) and in the last 100 years, since its disappearance, has inspired many great, but highly unsuccessful, ornithological adventures. Like Schrodinger’s Cat, the existence of the Night Parrot, it would seem to a human observer, can not be assured unless you actually see it fluttering through the spinifex grass. But apparently the harder you seek a Night Parrot, the less likely you are to observe it. Sightings occur when least expected and the encounter happens in no more than a glimpse, leaving the observer doubting their senses. For these reasons in 2012 the Smithsonian Institute nominated the Night Parrot as one of the worlds most cryptic and rare birds.

I had initially thought I could use the character of the Night Parrot as a signifier for the accelerating environmental changes that are afoot, however it didn’t work out that way.

Perversely I was also attracted to the problems of actually filming a Night Parrot. The bird is of cryptic habits and nocturnal...how to record to a cinematic image? As a pastoralist in Central Australia laconically pointed out to me when I was researching the story -“it gets awful dark out here at nighttime”.

## SO HOW TO MAKE A FILM?

There is a fundamental question to ask before setting out to make a film...”what is uniquely and particularly cinematic in this story that can only be told by a moving picture camera (for I could instead use only audio recordings or more simply the written word, still images, archival recordings). If you stay true to what can only be observed - as observers of bird behaviour do - and then impose a form on the images and observers behaviour, one that is not framed by words, then you are on your way to making a film. In this case a cinematic essay. There are many fine examples of ethnographic films that fulfil the charter of being truly only reproducible through thinking through a video camera. I like the dogma and the infinite complexity of that idea. Using film also imposes a question of the passage of time. Time is a component of the Night Parrot’s story.

Aspects of a missing character can be portrayed by framing their absence with the places that once surrounded them and with those who may have an interest in the missing character. I read the work of the environmental philosopher Donna Haraway. She memorably said ”nothing comes without its world”. In her words I found an entreaty to seek out places where the Night Parrot once existed... characters, situations, encounters. Through visiting these places I thought could perhaps conjure its existence in other ways than actually clapping eyes on it.

## SO WHAT NEXT?

I am interested in exploring non-human perspectives. Night Parrot Stories was the second film in a series of three. I am now starting work on a film on the Albatross and relationships with the pelagic southern Oceans. It will be the last film in the series. The first film was on Locusts (‘Memoirs of a Plague’). All the main characters are creatures of flight.

# CREW

## NIGHT PARROT STORIES

**DIRECTOR** Robert Nugent

**WRITER** Robert Nugent

**CINEMATOGRAPHER** Robert Nugent

**PRODUCERS** Mitzi Goldman & Robert Nugent

**EDITOR** Hilary Balmond

**SOUND DESIGNER** Sam Petty

**POST PRODUCTION** Two Dogs Post Sydney





# CONTACT

## NIGHT PARROT STORIES

For more information please contact Rob and he will be very happy to answer any question you may have.

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