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THE MONK PARAKEET AND NEW JERSEY AGRICULTURE

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A man released 160 Starlings in Central Park, New York City because he thought it would be nice to have every animal mentioned in Shakespeare's plays in the United States. Within the next 82 years, the Starling increased in numbers so numerous that agricultural damage caused by the exotic pest is now ranked in the millions. Any attempt to eliminate this imported nuisance from our environment would be practically impossible.

Another introduced bird is the English Sparrow. This bird has reproduced so prolifically that it also is now a pest in many sections of our country. In addition, parrots and parakeets have been brought into the United States for as long as our sailors have sailed to the distant tropics.

In more recent years, the keeping of exotic pets increased to almost fad proportions. The pet shops and importers have kept the United States supplied with a vast array of these species. Among them is the Monk Parakeet. Large numbers of Monk Parakeets have been imported to satisfy the demand for parrot-like birds.

The largest percentage of these birds went to pet stores and ultimately ended up in homes as pets. Unfortunately, some of these birds were released or escaped into the wild.

New Jersey, in the winter of 1969-70 had its first report of wild Monk Parakeets in Middlebush. Two birds were identified as Monk Parakeets. Since then that particular flock has grown to eight or more parakeets. Although this is a small increase in three years it should be noted that the season in their native South America is the reverse of our own. It would seem that the mating season would need to be changed to coincide with the Northern Hemisphere for the young to survive. The climate in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Brazil is very similar to that of New York and New Jersey. The South American habitat is 20° - 48° South latitude, whereas New Jersey is 30° - 40° North latitude. In this three year period New Jersey has gone from one location to over 35 locations with 13 nests.

In general, the parakeets are located in single or small flocks. Most sightings are in the more populated areas of the State. This is a belt 25 miles wide going from New York City southwest to Delaware. There does seem to be more birds directly across from New York City and Delaware than anywhere else along this belt.

The Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus)* is a parrot-like bird about the size of a morning dove. The bird is green from the back of its neck down to the tail and part way out the wings. The top of the head, face, neck, and breast are a soft gray. As the gray from the breast blends into the under tail culverts, the color changes to a yellow-green. The flight-feathers of the wings and the end of their tails are blue. The eyes and feet are dark

and the bill is flesh colored.

Monk Parakeets are the only parakeets that build a stick nest in the branches of trees. Some of the nests are made by a single bird; others by pairs. It is not unusual to have a dormitory nest of 8 or 10 Monk Parakeets. Although, in New Jersey we have not found any nests with more than three birds. Some nests nests have been constructed to enormous proportions. One was 3' x 5' x 2'. Oddly enough, this nest was made by a solitary Monk. A much more typical size would be 2' x 2' x $2^1/_2$'. One can only imagine what a nest would look like that had five pairs with each pair in its separate compartment. Nests can be found on almost any type of structure from church steeples to the eaves of a house or high in a Norway spruce tree. Nests are generally at heights of 20 to 35 feet, some even higher.

Although this bird does dominate a bird feeder and on occasion will attack and kill other birds, the most dangerous threat comes from its food habits. In South America it eats its way into about eight percent of agriculture nationwide, with up to a 45 percent crop loss in some locations. The Monk prefers fruit and grain crops.

In New Jersey with only a few isolated populations we have already received reports of damage to apples, corn, tomatoes, and severely pruned ornamental plants. In one case near Trenton a small maple tree was killed when Monks snipped off its branches.

New Jersey, in cooperation with other states, has initiated a recovery program using live traps. It seems that no one has yet developed a good system to capture these birds. A modified Bal-chatri trap has the best record so far. This trap is a cage containing a live decoy parakeet, covered on top with monofilament snares. Parakeets, attracted to the decoy, get their feet caught in the snares when they land on the traps. Another type of trap that is being tried is a drop gate trap using a decoy bird as a lure. Other traps are being made and tried with the hope that soon a workable system will be developed.

Good public relations will be a must. A Wanted Poster cooperatively put out by Rutgers. The New Jersey Division of Fish, Game and Shellfisheries, and the New Jersey Department of Agriculture was published in newspapers and magazines. A short television program was also given. Enlisting the help of birders and environmentalists would also be a help. Almost all of your sighting will be as a result of individuals sending in a letter or calling. Many individuals and groups were reluctant to help until they were reassured that the trapped birds were not going to be killed. Trapped birds will be studied at Rutgers to find out what their environmental impact on agriculture will be.

Indications are that almost one-half of the States in the United States have had sightings of this parakeet. Most states only have one or two locations, consisting of one or more birds. Management would not be too difficult now. Should action not be taken now it is likely that many millions of dollars will be lost each year to this new agricultural pest.

Consideration should also be given on the Federal level that will eliminate the introduction of other exotic vertebrate pests. A resolution to this effect has been recently passed by the National Plant Board, an organization

composed of State Departments of Agriculture representatives throughout the United States. We already have laws which prohibit the importation of exotic insects and diseases. Why do we bury our head in the sand when we encounter vertegrate pests?

Question: In the opinion of the speaker, is a federal eradication project desirable at this time?

Answer: I think that I would say that an eradication program initiated by either federal or some interstate cooperative agency, should be initiated because we have problems, primarily in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. We can maybe handle some of it.