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THE MONK PARAKEET IN NEW YORK

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Attention was focused on the Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) in New York State in 1971 when the first successful breeding record was documented for the state although Monk Parakeets had been noticed in New York and New Jersey since 1968 (Bull, 1971). Since 1971 awareness of the bird's potential for becoming an established species in New York has spread through several segments of the state's populace. This awareness has been created primarily through two articles in the magazine published by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), *The Conservationist* (Trimm, 1972) (Trimm, 1973); several articles in popular magazines, *Parade*, *Yankee*, *Sports Afield*; journals, *American Birds* and *Kingbird*; county cooperative extension bulletins and newsletters; and in numerous newspapers throughout the Northeast.

The Monk Parakeet is about 12 inches long (Mourning Dove size), weighs about 90 grams, and is native to Argentina and other temperate regions of South America. The bird is pale green with a soft gray forehead and breast, some blue on the flight feathers and a flesh-colored bill. They are gregarious throughout the year. The Monk Parakeet differs from other members of the parrot family in that it builds large communal nests of sticks. Each pair of parakeets has its own private compartment with a downward-pointing tunnel entrance from the inner unlined compartment. The nest is used as sleeping quarters year round and live twigs cut by the bird are continually added to the structure (Bump, 1971).

A brief review of the bird's history in New York shows that the bird remained a mere curiosity until 1972. At that time, because the population seemed to be increasing and because information gleaned from the literature and from those with first-hand experience with the bird in its native haunts of South America indicated that the bird posed a serious potential agricultural problem, several prominent individuals, birding and conservation societies, and state and federal agencies took the position that the bird should be retrieved or removed from the wild.

Just what are attributes that give the Monk Parakeet a bad name? Among those that have been enumerated are:

1. Its status as a serious crop, both fruit and grain, pest throughout much of its range in South America.
2. Competition with native birds for wild foods and nesting sites.
3. Competition with native birds for foods at feeder situations.
4. Its aggressive nature towards native birds.

Another nest containing two three-week old juveniles was taken down on June 21. The nest was rebuilt during early July and six eggs deposited. Viable eggs have been found in a nest as late as August 10. Information strongly suggests that the bird may be capable of raising two broods per year. All birds examined have been disease free.

Recently the DEC informed us that an additional 20 Monk Parakeets have been retrieved since August 11, making a total of about 75 birds removed from the wild since June 1. In addition to the Monk Parakeet, 10 other species of the family *Psittacidae* have been collected in the metropolitan New York area, four of which are known to have overwintered in New York. Two of these, the Canary-winged Parakeet (*Brotogeris versicolurus*) and Ring-necked Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*), deserve a few additional comments.

The Canary-winged Parakeet is smaller than the Monk Parakeet but larger than the Budgie, a species now commonly sold in all pet stores (Alden, 1973). Since the Canary-winged is primarily green, it has been frequently mistaken for the Monk. In its native home of Brazil and other South American countries, the Canary-winged is more of a forest species although it does have a taste for corn. Its potential for crop damage is unknown. An estimated 700 Canary-wings have frequented one roost in Miami, Florida area, but although there are a number of reports from New York and New Jersey, nesting has not yet been observed in the north.

The Ring-necked Parakeet, a native of India, is 16 inches long, thus larger than the Monk. It is bright green, with a very long blue-green tail, and a large bright red bill. The male has a black throat and a conspicuous black ring around its neck. The underwing coverts are yellow. Its food habits make it potentially as destructive as the Monk and its wary nature and cavity-nesting behavior will probably make retrieval efforts difficult, if attempted. There are currently several flocks of Ring-necks in the New York City area ranging in size from eight to over 20 birds, a fact which seems to lend credence to the belief that the birds are successfully breeding at this latitude.

The Cornell University program under the guidance of Dr. James Caslick is being conducted by Mr. Doug Kibbe. Captive Monk Parakeets are currently being studied in Ithaca, New York.

We can give you a brief resume of our progress at Cornell but must emphasize that these observations are tentative and subject to revision. Six quonset hut-shaped outdoor cages which open into a central enclosed passage-way designed to reduce the probability of accidental escapes have been constructed. These cages measure approximately 12 feet long, 14 feet wide, and 7 feet high. Three of these cages have been divided in half. With these facilities we can easily house 25-60 birds depending upon our objectives although we currently are making behavioral observations on only 6 juvenile Monk Parakeets. Although ethological data on free ranging birds would be preferable, particularly for comparative purposes, to those derived from captivity studies, the DEC's policy of collecting all known wild birds precludes us from obtaining these types of data. Consequently, even at the completion of our behavioral observations, large gaps will probably remain in our knowledge of this species potential home range size, dispersal rates and food habits.

5. Its utilization of live twigs for nesting materials which may be cut from ornamental shrubs and trees.
6. Its vocal qualities which have been described from a raucous squawking to a metallic twittering.
7. Introduction of diseases and parasites.

A significant item that has certainly influenced the further spread of the species is a USDA ban on the importation of all avian species that has been in effect for about a year because of the exotic Newcastle disease. This has, in effect, given agencies a grace period to decide what action should be taken and to implement any action program without the possibility of several thousand new individuals being added to the wild population. In 1969, 8,636 individuals were imported into our country as cage pets and 1970, 14,246 individuals, which made the Monk Parakeet the 14th most frequently imported avian species (Clapp *et al.*, 1973). During the five years prior to the import restriction 64,000 birds were imported.

Is the population increasing or what is the current status of the Monk Parakeet? It has been sighted in more than 20 states but in this presentation only the biological observations from New York State will be discussed. The DEC with the cooperation of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife began discussing the Monk Parakeet in 1972. During the spring of 1973 a retrieval program was initiated. Information has been solicited and reported sightings have been published in several newspaper articles and accumulated by county and regional bird clubs throughout the state. Single bird sighting reports between the summers of 1972 and 1973 number 50 to 75. About 20 sightings of more than one bird were recorded. A few colonies were reported from metropolitan New York City with the greatest concentration, "Hundreds," being reported from Rikers Island in New York City (Trimm, 1973). However, when DEC personnel were finally able to obtain permission two weeks ago to visit Rikers Island, a penitentiary in the Hudson River, they were only able to locate one abandoned nest.

Biological information on the species is being accumulated primarily by two parties in New York, the DEC and the Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. The DEC is gathering much of their information as they retrieve and study the birds in the wild.

In a paper that is currently in the press, biologists with the DEC describe capturing or shooting 55 Monk Parakeets, collecting 12 eggs, and inspecting eight active nests mainly in the New York metropolitan area from June 1, 1973 to August 11, 1973 (Roscoe *et al.*, 1974). A breakdown of these 55 by age and sex reveal that 34, or 62% were juveniles. Twelve birds were adult males and nine were adult females. A variety of nesting sites were utilized and the largest nest inspected was six feet by four feet with eight entrance tunnels three to four inches in diameter and a foot in depth and serving seven compartments.

All adult males recovered were undergoing spermatogenesis even though two of the birds were bachelor nest builders. The first nest inspected on June 7 contained 18 juveniles of varying ages. The first egg laying in this nest was estimated at mid-April.

A few preliminary findings based on our food preference studies may be of interest to many of you present. Observations indicate that Monk Parakeets prefer to feed on elevated perches rather than on the ground. They will readily feed on the ground, however, if no alternative feeding site is available. When offered alternative foodstuffs, the following agricultural crops were preferred: grapes, cherries, apples, corn, and sunflower seeds. These crops are presented in the apparent order of preference. We would like to emphasize however, that an extremely wide variety of vegetables, fruits, and grains are accepted as food and preferences exhibited in captivity may be poor indicators of food habits in the wild.

In summary, the Monk Parakeet's potential for establishment in New York State seems quite high while its status as an agricultural pest remains an ominous unknown. The importation ban on all birds has been an important factor in the success of attempts to eliminate the Monk Parakeet since the probable origin of many birds is releases by dissatisfied petowners.

The success of the retrieval program in New York depends on a persistent continued effort by state collection personnel. Although wild Monk Parakeet populations have been significantly reduced in the New York City area, the birds ability to survive and breed in northern latitudes and the existence of other populations, particularly in southern areas of the United States, render it a continuing threat.

Several other species of *Psittacine* birds represent a potential threat since they are receiving little attention by state and federal agencies. The Monk Parakeet situation typifies what Dr. Jackson so aptly termed yesterday as a "cultural exchange of a bird problem."

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Question: Parrots are known to have a long life-span. Does anyone know what the life-span of the Monk Parakeet is? And what is the length of their reproductive life?

Answer: Off hand I do not know the age or the longevity of the parakeet. I don't think it's even been published at all, at least to my recollection.

Comment: It's estimated at fifteen years under aviary or home conditions.

Question: Have you ever played the recording to free-living birds and checked the reaction?

Answer: One of the methods that has been used in trapping those parakeets is using a decoy in a trapping situation to attract birds. I don't know if a tape recorder as such has been used.