

# EXOTIC BIRDS IN THE NEW YORK CITY AREA

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## PART I

In addition to the Ring-necked Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*), Rock Dove (*Columba livia*), Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), and the House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), which were initially introduced into North America in the New York City region during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*) was also first imported here, though not until much later, in the second decade of this century. Unlike those widespread species, it is essentially restricted to the northeastern states, mainly within 100 miles of New York City.

Within the past decade, waterfowl (11 species), parrots (11 species), and finches (sensu lato), i.e., Ploceidae, Estrildidae, and Fringillidae (12 species), lead the list of foreign introduced species that have managed to escape from time to time, but nearly all have failed to establish themselves. Of all the exotic, introduced species it is the family Psittacidae (parrots) which have made the headlines in recent years. Certain members of this well-known tropical group have been commonly imported and have escaped into the greater New York area, and one species appears to have become established.

Within the past dozen years or so, members of the parrot family have been imported into the United States in tremendous numbers from many parts of the world. This has been made possible through the development of specific antibiotics in the treatment of psittacosis or "parrot fever"—more properly ornithosis or "bird fever," as chickens, pigeons, and other kinds of birds are as much carriers of this contagious disease as are parrots. With the elimination of this threat, the ban on importing psittacine birds (parrots, parakeets, macaws, cockatoos, lories, and others) was lifted resulting in a veritable flood of these popular birds into this country. However, as of July 1972 all psittacines were banned from importation into the United States without special permit because they are potential carriers of Newcastle's disease, sometimes fatal to domestic poultry.

It is outside the scope of this article to mention all of the diverse kinds of parrots imported. Only the following 11 species reported as seen in the "wild" are treated here. These attractive and colorful birds have always been favorites of aviculturists, and their proverbial tameness, plus ability to "talk," as well as possession of other human attributes, has made them highly desirable as pets.

Suffice it to state that at least 11 species of the parrot family have become very popular as cage birds and have escaped from time to time. Of these 11, two have been found as escapes in the wild in large numbers, one of these even found breeding in the northeastern portions of the United States—the Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*).

The Monk Parakeet is the only species of the 11 that is gray-breasted—one of its vernacular names. It is also gray on the forehead. The pet trade knows this species as the Quaker Parakeet. That the Monk Parakeet has survived four northern winters is very likely due to its being a constant visitor to the numerous well-stocked feeding stations, partaking of mixed wild bird seed, sunflowers, meat scraps, various fruits, bread, cake, and other tidbits. It comes from the temperate zone of southern South America which has a climate not unlike ours, though theirs is somewhat milder and drier.

Much has been written about the Monk Parakeet in recent years as to its status in the wild in and around New York City. Newspaper articles and requests for information

about this bird have become increasingly frequent. What with numerous individuals escaping from air shipments, and both accidental and deliberate releases from aviaries, pet shops, and private homes, Monk Parakeets have become adapted to our climate, and have settled down to propagate and have extended their domain far into the suburbs and even to outlying sections. There is hardly a day that passes without one or more telephone calls and letters to the writer asking for information about the "strange green birds"—almost always recognized as parrots.

A comparison of the 11 species is given so that one may be able to identify the various forms when seen. Total length in inches, from bill tip to tail tip, is approximate. The sexes are either alike or very similar.

(1) Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*).—southern South America; 11 inches; long pointed tail; mostly green with much of head and breast gray, wings blue. Perches freely on rooftops, telephone wires, in bushes and trees, and if nesting, will usually be found in the vicinity of the large domed stick nests which are placed in trees, on buildings, utility poles, and various other structures. Highly gregarious, up to six pairs per nest.

(2) Canary-winged Parakeet (*Brotogeris versicolurus*).—called "Bee-bee" in the pet trade; tropical South America; eight inches; tail long and pointed; mostly all green with long yellow and white wing patch. This species is considerably smaller than the Monk Parakeet and, with the bright yellow and white wing patch, is very conspicuous, especially when in flight. It is here in large numbers and flocks of up to 50 birds have been reported on two occasions as descending on feeding stations, once on eastern Long Island, and once in eastern Connecticut. Despite their tropical origin, Canary-winged Parakeets have managed to survive at least one northern winter—thanks to feeders and fruiting trees and shrubs.

(3) Orange-chinned Parakeet (*Brotogeris jugularis*).—called "Tovi Parakeet" in the trade; tropical zone from southern Mexico to northern South America; still smaller, seven inches; *short* pointed tail; mostly greenish with orange chin; wing-coverts brown. Although imported in considerable numbers, relatively few of these birds have escaped.

(4) Orange-fronted Parakeet (*Aratinga canicularis*).—called "Half-moon" in the trade; tropical Middle America from Mexico to Costa Rica; ten inches; long pointed tail; all green with a narrow reddish-orange crescent-shaped band on forehead; wings and tail dark blue. Imported in very large numbers, but relatively few have been reported hereabouts.

(5) Yellow-headed Parrot or Amazon (*Amazona ochrocephala*).—called "Double Yellow-head" in the trade; tropical America; a large parrot, 16 inches in length, with a *short* blunt tail; green, and depending on the subspecies, varying amounts of yellow on the head—from an all yellow head to yellow restricted on crown, forehead, or nape; wings blue with red patches—one at base of primaries, the other at bend of wing. A few have escaped and two even survived the northern winter by feeding on crabapples!

(6) Black-hooded Parakeet (*Nandayus nenday*).—called "Nenday" in the trade; southern South America; 13 inches, with long pointed tail, mostly green with a conspicuous *black* head and bill; primaries bluish-black. Has escaped into portions of northern New Jersey where it has been reported as "attempting to nest"!!

(7) Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*).—called "Budgie," "Shell Parakeet," or "Lovebird" in the trade; most of Australia; as the familiar "Budgie" is known to almost everyone a detailed description is scarcely needed; seven inches; long pointed tail; colors may be green (wild population), blue, or yellow; barred black and white on head and upper back. Frequently escapes from captivity, but rarely, if ever, survives

our harsh winters. Not known to visit feeders—at least regularly—which may be the reason it does not survive.

(8) Masked Lovebird (*Agapornis personata*).—tropical East Africa; not imported in large numbers, but reported now and then in city parks. Very small, only five inches; *short*, squarish tail; bill bright red; head blackish with conspicuous yellow eye-ring; neck and breast yellow; rest of plumage green.

(9) Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*).—called “Ring-necked Parakeet” in the trade, but several species of this genus possess neck rings; tropical and subtropical Africa and southern Asia; 15 inches; long pointed tail; heavy red bill; mainly greenish, with throat and fore-collar black; hind-collar pinkish. Imported in small numbers, but has been reported in this vicinity as having escaped on a number of occasions.

(10) Blossom-headed Parakeet (*Psittacula cyanocephala*).—“Blossom-head” in the trade; tropical southeast Asia west to India and Ceylon; 15 inches; long pointed tail, blue with white tips; head red with purple bloom; narrow black collar; throat black; otherwise generally greenish with small chestnut patch on bend of wing. A very beautiful species. Reported in small numbers in the “wild,” although not infrequent in captivity.

(11) Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*).—most of Australia; 13 inches; *crested*; tail long and pointed—white; generally *gray* with long white wing patch; face yellow with orange cheek patch; female similar, but duller. This is the only species of the 11 enumerated here with a conspicuous crest. Although a common species in captivity, very few have escaped. It is very dubious if they would survive for long.

#### PART II. MONK PARAKEET

Within the past few years in the greater New York metropolitan region, numerous reports of green parrot-like birds have come into the American Museum's bird department. Investigation has shown that the great majority of these reports were Monk Parakeets from South America where thousands are exported yearly. They have since become established locally in the northeastern United States, have nested here, and even raised young.

The Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) occurs in the subtropical and temperate zones of South America from the southern portions of Bolivia and Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, to central Argentina, in the last-named country south at least to Rio Negro province to approximately 40 degrees south latitude. The species is virtually sedentary. It is the sole representative of its genus.

The principal habitats of these birds in their native land are areas of low rainfall in light open forest, savanna, palm groves, thorn scrub, croplands, and fruit orchards. The species is hardy and cold-adapted—minimum temperature records in the central Argentine being as low as 20 degrees Fahrenheit, but usually from 50 to 90 degrees. These birds are found chiefly in the lowlands, rarely up to 3000 feet in the Andean foothills.

The sexes are alike in the Monk Parakeet. It is a stocky bird with thick-set head, broad, hooked bill, and long pointed tail. The overall length is about eleven inches. In color it is chiefly bright grass green. The forehead, cheeks, throat, and breast are light gray. The wings, especially the primaries, are dark blue. The tail is bluish-green, the bill pinkish-cinnamon, the small eyes black, and the legs and feet gray.

This species has various harsh and raucous chattering notes. It can imitate whistles, but generally is a poor talker with little repertoire. It is “friendly and intelligent” in captivity, and can be taught to feed from the hand if raised from the nest; thus it is a tame and confiding pet, and attractive as well.

Monk Parakeets are generally gregarious, occurring in loose flocks of up to a dozen or more. These birds are very fast flyers, moving at no great distance above ground, usually in a direct line of flight from nest to the feeding area and back again. Although relatively tame around the nest, these birds are ordinarily wild and shy at other times.

The Monk Parakeet is unique among the more than 330 parrot species, in being the only stick-nesting member of the family, and one of the few communal breeders in this widespread group. All others are hole or cavity nesters. In their native lands Monk Parakeets build huge stick nests in trees, occasionally on telephone poles. These stick nests are domed, sometimes as much as eight feet in diameter—enough to fill several bushel baskets. Twigs or sticks one-half inch or more in diameter and a foot long are often used, sometimes covered with thorns. Up to a dozen pairs breed in each nest, although two (once as many as six) pairs seem to be the maximum here. Entrance holes are at the side or bottom and each pair has a separate entrance, as well as a separate chamber within the huge structure. These nests are used for both roosting and breeding and are continually under repair throughout the year.

These parrots lay from five to eight glossy white eggs which are relatively small for the size of the bird. The eggs are laid in the chambers some distance from the entrance holes. In some of the largest nests in South America, other animals have been found, such as tree-ducks (*Dendrocygna*) and arboreal opossums, occasionally storks.

Monk Parakeets have a very varied and highly omnivorous diet: fruits—both wild and cultivated—nuts, grass seeds, grains, legumes such as acacia and mimosa pods, insects and, when available at northern feeding stations, meats and suet. I have also seen these birds cracking open pine cones to get at the seeds, as well as stripping foxtail grass seeds off the heads.

During 1968 alone nearly 12,000 Monk Parakeets were imported into the United States, according to government sources. With few or no restrictions on psittacine birds, thousands more came into American ports within the past three years (since 1970). As the species is abundant, the sales price is low. These birds are sold for as little as eight dollars apiece retail in pet shops and department stores. The pet trade and aviculturists know this species by the name of Quaker or Gray-breasted Parakeet. "Monk" and "Quaker" are obvious references to the bird's gray hood-like dress. Multiple releases by design and by accident have resulted in a sizable resident population in southeastern New York, and the adjacent portions of Connecticut and New Jersey. These releases, that is escaped birds, came from broken crates at Kennedy Airport, accidental escapes from pet shops, aviaries, and private owners, as well as intentional releases by persons tired of caring for these parrots. They survived at least two cold and snowy winters by visiting well-stocked feeding stations and have constructed their now-familiar bulky stick nests in a number of localities.

These ubiquitous birds have attached nests to various man-made structures, in addition to the more usual natural vegetation as found in their native South American home.

Regarding the latter category nests have been placed in various broad-leaved deciduous trees, in a cavity-like opening in the broken-off top of a Paulownia tree, and only seven feet above ground in a tangle of pussy willow and rose bush.

There are also at least two nests in evergreens—one in a small pine tree, the other in an ornamental spruce.

In the "man-made" category these adaptable birds have shown an amazing versatility of nest sites. Nests have been attached to both wooden and brick buildings, usually under the eaves; on unused window ledges; between walls and rain gutters; in one instance, under the peak of a house roof atop an air-conditioner fronting on a small dormer window;

on a school fire-escape landing; and finally between a house window and a broken screen left ajar. Transformer boxes on telephone and light poles are favored also.

Some rather odd locations have been: on a steel beam of the club house at the south end of the grandstand at Aqueduct race track in Queens, Long Island; in a smashed glass globe of a floodlight used to illuminate Cleopatra's Needle behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City's Central Park; on an abandoned metal crane on Riker's Island in the East River between the Bronx and Queens; and last but not least—nearly 100 feet up on the steel platform of a United States Coast Guard microwave tower at Fort Tilden, Rockaway Beach, Long Island!

The Monk Parakeet has bred also in the outdoor enclosures of the Bronx, London, and Paris zoos, and in the wild in the city parks of Amsterdam, Holland.

Actual *successful* breeding in North America in the wild (fledged young) has been reported on very few occasions—including one young offspring in captivity in the writer's house—especially tame and confiding towards the writer's wife, feeding from her hand, and also a record of a young bird from Staten Island.

This attractive species, unlike the drab Starling and House Sparrow, makes a good pet, but unfortunately like them, may also become a pest. The Monk Parakeet is reported to be a serious menace to agricultural crops in the Argentine, especially to corn, millet, rice, and sorghum, and to citrus fruits. Despite bounties being paid out, control of the birds has been unsuccessful.

Although damage to fruit and grain crops in the north might be only moderate or even minimal, it would likely be another story in parts of the south or southwest where these birds would be sure to thrive. Be that as it may, it appears to be fairly well established in portions of the northeast, if only very local.

Monk Parakeets have proved hardy birds, as they survived two consecutive very cold winters, snowbound in some areas; usually more severe here than in a similar latitude south of the equator. As long as a ready-made food supply is at hand, these adaptable birds are able to thrive. Many feeding station operators, including bored housewives, see to it that their "favorites" come through with bountiful handouts—proof that food, not temperature is the main survival factor.

To date, I have heard of no protests about depredations from landowners, gardeners, farmers, or fruit growers. The next few years may tell a different story, but in the meantime these interesting birds are here to stay and for the time appear to be prospering.

It would be desirable to continue the ban on further importations of these and other parrots, with the exception of stock for accredited zoos and aviaries under import license. At the same time it would alleviate pressure on other species which are rare and in great need of protection.

Since writing the above, this ban was removed.