

Meadowlark

A JOURNAL OF ILLINOIS BIRDS

Volume 8, Number 1

1999



MEADOWLARK

A Journal of Illinois Birds

Volume 8, Number 1 - 1999

ISSN 1065-2043

President's Message

It's difficult to think nesting season when "we northern folks" are still waiting for the migrants that we saw in southern Illinois during our annual meeting to make their way north. By all accounts the meeting, held the last weekend in April, was a great success; more than 200 Illinois Audubon Society (IAS) and IOS members attended. The weather was great and the field trips were superb. We enjoyed many migratory birds and wild flowers as well as excellent presentations. A successful meeting does not happen all by itself and requires lots of hard work by a group of people and those individuals need to be recognized. Organizing this joint meeting was Joe Suchecki for IOS and Marilyn Campbell of IAS. Marilyn and her office staff did a super job of handling registration, and Keith McMullen and his committee did an equally superb job organizing the field trips. The facilities at the Rend Lake Resort were great and the staff and caterers were most helpful.

Many others contributed to the success of the meeting that need to be recognized. Thanks to all of you who helped. A complete report on the meeting may be found in the newsletter.

If you haven't visited one of our fine state park lodges and resorts, you should plan to do so soon. Also mark your calendars for our Year 2000 Annual Meeting the third week in May at Illinois Beach State Park, where we northerners are planning to show the southerners a great time and some specialty birds of our own. In the meantime, don't forget to bird during breeding season. You'll find as many surprises during June, July and August, as you do during migration periods; it just requires more effort.

Until next time — good birding.

Bob Montgomery

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About Our Cover:

Purple Gallinule illustration by David J. Athans. See Frank Bennett's Mermet Lake nesting story on page 11.

The Status of the Monk Parakeet in Illinois:

with comments on its native habitat and habits

by Jason South

Upon arriving at the University of Chicago in autumn 1996, I was greatly surprised by repeat sightings of Ovenbirds and Yellow-Bellied Sapsuckers on the quadrangles. However, little could prepare me for the green and blue explosion I witnessed one fall day. Bright, startling color had emerged from a tree ripe with red crabapples, only to quickly disappear amid the dark branches. Later I learned I had seen the gregarious Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*), after a taxi driver alerted me to the huge twig constructions dripping from a green ash tree at 53rd Street and Lake Shore Drive. An opportunity now presented itself to employ the vast knowledge of the science libraries.

What I found, unfortunately, is that the ecology of the Monk Parakeet, also called Quaker Parakeet by the pet trade, is poorly understood in the United States. In the early 1970s, interest in this species peaked due to its reputation as a pest species in South America and its recent appearance in several urban areas. In 1967, free-flying Monk Parakeets had been reported in the New York City area, and three years later nests were already present. Over the next five years these parakeets appeared in the wild in over a dozen states, including the first sighting in Chicagoland in 1973. Perhaps these now-feral parrots shouldn't have



Monk Parakeets love crabapples, which are plentiful in Hyde Park as they ripen in late summer. The parakeets manipulate food and nesting material with their claws and beak. Photos taken in the Summer of 1998 in Hyde Park by Jason South.



been a surprise: from 1968 to 1970 over 30,000 Monk Parakeets were imported into the United States from the southern portions of South America (Neidermyer & Hickey, 1977).

Most of these small groups of parakeets throughout the United States disappeared as quickly as they had come, presumably from natural causes. In the spring of 1973 several states including New York and California initiated eradication campaigns. Shooting was the preferred retrieval method. Two separate counts estimated that 44% of the U. S. Monk Parakeet population was destroyed. Monk Parakeets have persisted in the Northeast until today, whereas the State of California completely eliminated Monk Parakeets through vigorous eradication policies. Birds are often destroyed at the state border, and when small colonies appear, they are quickly eliminated. Seventeen states besides California restrict Monk Parakeet ownership in some way, but Illinois is not one of them.

After 1973, interest in Monk Parakeets in the scientific community dwindled. One should find this lack of interest surprising, as the little data collected suggest the Monk Parakeet population in the United States has increased dramatically since then. One study analyzed Christmas Bird Count (CBC) records in which observers

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reported 1,186 birds from 76 localities in 15 states in 1994-95, while they had reported a mere 33 birds in 1975-76. Most of the Monk Parakeet (1,463 or 80.6%) sightings in 1994-95 came from two states, Florida and Texas. These data fit the standard equation of exponential growth (Van Bael & Pruett-Jones 1996).

Chicago population

The winter of 1998, I counted 48 nests in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, and the summer of 1998, I noticed many new nests as well as previously existing nests that had grown. There were 83 active chambers in these nests, but the number is certainly larger now. Since Monk Parakeets are monogamous and roost in their stick nests year-round (Forshaw 1989), a fair estimate of the Hyde Park population the winter of 1998 would be 170 Monk Parakeets (although one or two young often stay

in the chamber with the parents until the next spring). However, several large nests were removed from utility poles in late October and early November. One of these nests contained at least 20 nesting chambers and rivaled a large appliance in size. These nests could have harbored from 60-90 more individuals, bringing the total population of Monk Parakeets in Hyde Park closer to 240.

While Monk Parakeets have bred continuously in Hyde Park for almost 20 years, they have also appeared in several other Chicagoland locations. Nesting has been confirmed in 1998 in Carol Stream (although nests have repeatedly been removed by the electric company), Bensenville, Berwyn, North Riverside, Calumet Park, and Burnham. Most nesting colonies outside of Hyde Park contain only one or two nests, but in Burnham there are at least seven (unpub. data, pers. comm. from Chicago-area birders). It is not

known whether the parakeets in Hyde Park are a source population for these other sites.

I suspect that there has been more than one escape or release, as one study in Argentina documented a median dispersal from natal nest to first breeding location as only 1,230 meters (Martin & Bucher 1993). At least two locations are obvious points of introduction: O'Hare Airport and Hyde Park. Additionally Monk Parakeets have been observed in free-flight in Addison, at Fermi Laboratory (DuPage County), in Zion (Lake County) where they nested, in Blue Island, and in downtown Grant Park.

Clearly the Monk Parakeet has established itself in Chicago. Only a vigorous, sustained effort could dislodge this species; that is, if you could win the sympathies of the general public that adores its parakeets. When the U. S. Department of Agriculture announced plans to eradicate the

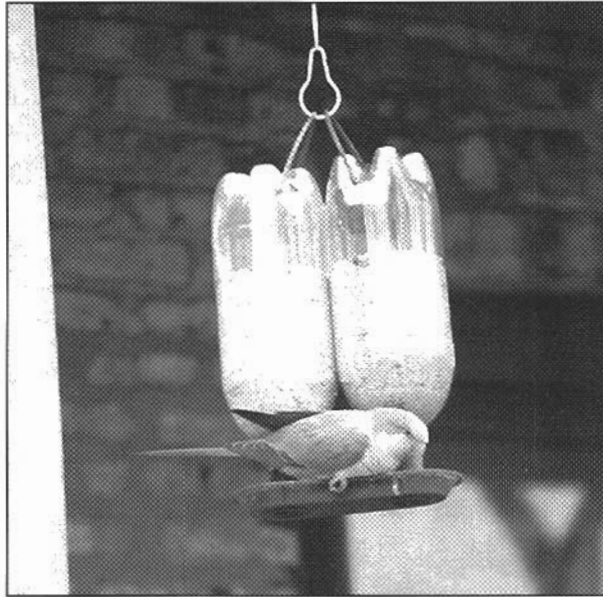


Monk Parakeets roosting in a tree in Hyde Park on an extremely cold afternoon. Photo taken by Jason South on 9 March 1998 when the temperature was 17 degrees F.

Hyde Park birds in the late 1980s, a citizen group calling themselves the Harold Washington Memorial Parakeet Defense Fund, thwarted the effort with threats of a lawsuit (Chicago Tribune 1988). The late Mayor Washington was very fond of the birds that nested outside his apartment, and compared their experience to the plight of African-Americans in this city. University of Chicago students have also often seen the parakeets as representative of their status in Hyde Park, sometimes suggesting that the Monk Parakeet should become the school mascot.

Lately the Monk Parakeet has generated more negative attention, but not from any government agency. Commonwealth Edison, which supplies electrical power to Chicago, has found the parakeets to be a major nuisance. Monk Parakeets tend to nest in tall trees with few lower branches, or in the last century, utility poles. They favor the introduced eucalyptus in South America and the date palm in Florida, both tall trees with limited hiding spaces for predators (Spreyer & Bucher 1998). Utility poles are also very tall and have no obstructions between the nest and the ground. Furthermore, the lattice of supports, wires, and transformers at the top of utility poles provides an ideal nesting substrate, and it has been surmised that the electrical power running through the wires may provide some heat. It is perhaps a testament to the incredible building skills of the Monk Parakeet that their nests are such great insulators that they can cause the transformers to overheat. In the summer of 1997 one such fire broke out, damaging thousands of dollars worth of equipment and cutting off power to

residents. These nests have been removed three times now, but the birds continue to rebuild. The electrical equipment has been updated to eliminate many of the lattices that offer such great support for the huge stick



In winter, Monk Parakeets rely heavily on bird feeders for sustenance. Photo taken in the Winter of 1998 in Chicago by Jason South.

nests, but the parakeets have already rebuilt several of their removed nests.

In the winter of 1998, only 15% of the 48 Hyde Park nests were on utility poles; most were in trees in local parks. Most residents I have spoken with enjoy having the parakeets in their neighborhood. The only common complaint is the incessant noise, which can be oppressive if one lives near a large group of nests. A few residents also complain of the fallen sticks they must remove and of the pilfering of apples from backyard trees. On one occasion I have observed parakeets taking bites out of backyard tomatoes. Such observations force us to question whether the Monk Parakeet poses a real threat to Illinois agriculture, regardless of its charm. This hardy species reproduces quickly, but seems to be highly local-

ized. The nest offers shelter during the winter, but the parakeets may survive the coldest months solely on bird seed provided by man (Hyman & Pruett-Jones 1995). In that case they would not survive in large numbers in primarily rural agricultural areas and would not seem to pose a significant danger.

The scientific literature provides conflicting views of the threat posed by Monk Parakeets. One study in Brazil found that in a colony of Monk Parakeets nesting closely to agricultural fields, cultivated corn and wheat made up 54% and 10.3% of their diet, respectively (Dahlem 1994). In Florida, Monk Parakeets feed on agricultural crops of exotic fruit that include lychee, longan, mango, and black sapote (vanDoorn pers. comm.). However, the actual damage to crops in South America by parrots, especially Monk Parakeets, is often overstated. Government assistance is often at stake, and it is much easier to see bright green birds foraging on the crops than small insects. Poor agricultural practices may also lead to the most serious damage (Bucher 1992).

Competition with other species is another concern for the ecological and birding communities. Monk Parakeet populations have largely remained localized in residential areas, but in Florida and Puerto Rico the opportunity for parakeets to occur near agricultural fields may be high. This species does not compete for nesting chambers in trees, but little is known of its diet in North America.

So far the Monk Parakeet has not emerged as the next European Starling. It has been more of a local oddity, like the rare white deer from China that roam the grounds of

Argonne National Laboratory. The population growth of Monk Parakeets should be monitored closely, and more research on the most basic aspects of their natural history in North America should be undertaken. We shouldn't encourage the growth of this species through deliberate releases, but at the same time it seems unnecessary to utilize sparse resources to control the population at this time.

How to see the parakeets

The best time of the year to view Monk Parakeets is in spring. They repair their bulky stick nests all year round, but in spring, construction is an obsession. Loud, chattering para-

keets fly from tree to nest all day, tearing off fresh twigs and weaving them into the nest structure with agile beak and feet. Plan a morning trip to Jackson Park in spring during peak warbler migration. Just south of Bobolink Meadow is a driving range where five or six nests are built on stadium lights. A short journey farther south will bring you to the Jackson Park Golf Course.

Just west of Hole 1 are another five or six nests woven into the branches of several tall trees. If you can't see the birds, you should hear them.

You might also look for the 27 seven nests in Washington Park, a short drive away. About half of those

are in the park at 54th Street and Cottage Grove, in between a playground and a National Guard Armory. You can stand in the middle of a grove of trees and literally be surrounded by Monk Parakeets and their nests. Another 10 or 11 nests are behind the armory, near the northwest corner.

Finally, there's Harold Washington Park at 53rd Street and Lake Shore Drive. At one time nine nests were in one green ash tree. Now there are only three, but one large nest is one of the most impressive in Hyde Park.

The Hyde Park parakeets are also online, at <http://student-www.uchicago.edu/users/jmsouth/>

Editor's Note: *The Illinois Ornithological Records Committee, in 1999, officially placed the Monk Parakeet on the Illinois State Checklist of Birds. The committee used this paper to help in its decision.*

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The Monk Parakeet (Myiopsitta monachus) is now an official member of the Illinois State Checklist. This photo, taken by Jason South, shows a Monk Parakeet sitting on a nest in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago the summer of 1998. For an article by South about the status of Monk Parakeets in Illinois, see pages 2-5 inside.