

Will wild monk/Quaker parrots be tolerated in North American cities?

Parrots in the City, One Bird's Struggle for a Place on the Planet

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∞∞∞∞ Jo-Ann's Journal, May 17, 2001 ∞∞∞∞

### THE QUEST

Today is my birthday, and I'm awake *MUCH* earlier than usual, not because of my new age, but because I do not want to miss the alarm. You know how it is. You set the alarm, but you're afraid it was set wrong or that you'll sleep through it? I have something special to do today — an important mission — and it has nothing to do with my birthday.

The maps are ready. I cover the car seats with clean sheets, pack a pile of "bird" towels, and carefully fit an assortment of plastic buckets into the back so that they won't roll around. I check off a list: keys, sunglasses, cell phone, hand cleaner, long sleeve shirt, bug spray (bugs have been a problem before).

At our special breakfast place, Jon-Mark treats himself to a jalapeno bagel with eggs and veggies. I'm too excited to eat much, settle for the cinnamon raisin bagel. Heads together, we study the maps, keeping a close eye on the clock. I didn't get up at 4:30 to be late now. I kiss Jon-Mark goodbye at 7:30. For today's adventure, I'm flying solo.

There's no one at the first stop, a 900 address not far from home. Calling the contact number on my cell phone, I'm told that I need to chase down a 9000 address.

*Is that 81 blocks away?*

Now *I AM* in a hurry, hit every light red, noticing that there are still a good many "snowbirds" — tourists and seasonal residents — in Florida for this time of year.

At the right pole at last, I see a man under the bucket of the truck stuffing nest remains into a huge thick plastic bag. Not a baby Quaker in sight.

*What have I done?*

My head spins. I'm filled with guilt for being late.

"No eggs or babies in this nest," a voice calls down from a high lift bucket, "not even angry adults!"

*Relief!!*

The two power company workers responsible for removing nests introduce themselves. David and Harry now prepare to move to the next nest. I jump back into the car, ready to drive what looks like a few miles on the map.

David, in the driver's seat of the bucket truck, moves to THE NEXT POLE!

Now we see angry adults, parrot cursing, flying, circling commotion. I feel bad but flushed with hope.

These babies will have a chance.

These babies will not be tossed to the ground to die.

*That's why I'm here.*

## CHAPTER TWO THE FIRST NORTH AMERICAN PARROTS



Carolina Parakeets in the Denver Museum of Nature and Science

*“ . . . Parakeets are destroyed in great numbers . . . the husbandman approaches them with perfect ease and commits great slaughter among them. All the survivors rise, shriek, fly around about for a few minutes, and again alight on the very place of most imminent danger. . . .*

**John James Audubon, 1831, from Forshaw, *Parrots of the World*.<sup>9</sup>**

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away from New Zealand, lived two parrots with distinctly different ranges. One, the thick-billed parrot was rare and sparsely distributed in the mountains of Arizona and New Mexico.

Another bird, the Carolina conure, also called the Carolina parakeet, was common and lived exclusively in the United States. This

species included two subspecies, the larger inhabiting the eastern United States from Florida to New York. The smaller subspecies occurred as far west as southeastern Colorado, south to Louisiana and Texas, north to Illinois, and was common in Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.<sup>10</sup>

History has a way of repeating itself. The thick-billed parrot had experienced considerable decline during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Attempts to reintroduce thick-bills into the United States during the 1980s were unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup> Thick-billed parrots are still occasionally seen in the Sierra Madre Mountains of western Mexico. The Carolina conure has been extinct for almost a century.

### **TYPING A SPECIES**

A curious part of the scientific process of naming a living species involves the “collection” of a “type specimen.” An animal that has never before been identified by the scientific community is killed or found dead and the skin of that animal becomes part of a collection, usually in a museum of natural history. The name of the scientist who first killed or provided a member of this taxon may become a part of that animal’s name. For example, the Spix macaw is called “*Cyanopsittacus spixi*” after Johann Baptist Ritter von Spix. “Spix’s blue parrot” was rare even in 1819, the year the first specimen was collected.<sup>12</sup>

### **THE AMERICAN TYPE PARROT**

As of 1939, seventy-seven bird species were typed in South Carolina.<sup>13</sup> That is, specimens used to describe and name those species were first collected in South Carolina. The Carolina parakeet was one of them. This beautiful yellow, orange, and green conure was an opportunistic eater that surely feasted on the crops provided by and for humans.<sup>14</sup> When cockleburs were available, however, the little parrot preferred burs to corn. It has been speculated that if cockleburs had

been left in rows between the fields that the corn crop, at least, might have remained unmolested. The last captive specimen of the Carolina parakeet died in the Cincinnati Zoo on February 21, 1918.<sup>15</sup>

### THE CAROLINA CONURE

*(Conuropsis carolinensis)*

- Subspecies:** *carolinensis* (larger, eastern distribution) and *ludovicianus* (smaller, western distribution)
- Height:** About 12-14 inches
- Color:** Darker green wings, back, and tail with lighter green belly, orange forehead and cheeks, yellow head.
- Range:** Florida north to New York and the Great Lakes, North and South Dakota, west along the Gulf Coast through the Midwest to Eastern Colorado, United States of America
- Diet:** Fond of burrs, but would eat thistle, seeds, fruits, nuts, berries, blossoms, insects, and leaf buds, also sand, gravel, and saline earth
- Behavior:** Very vocal, non-migratory, cavity breeding, communal nesters
- Avg clutch:** Number of eggs laid unknown (probably few)

### END OF THE AMERICAN PARAKEET

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, intentional extermination of pest species was expected and commonplace, as we had a nation to build; and farmers in those days had an even more difficult life than farmers today. There was no such thing as food stamps, welfare, or aid to families with dependent children. In those days, if crops failed, the whole family could be malnourished within a year. While groups of farmers did help one another, local crop failures could leave entire communities starving en masse. The age-related disease of macular

degeneration so common in today's elderly could be related to poor childhood nutrition among those born between 1900 and 1918, the very time when remnants of the Carolina parakeet were destroyed.

Little documentation exists about the true extent to which Carolina parakeets threatened agriculture. The birds were described in many other activities with only isolated reports of crop destruction. They probably did substantially less damage than weather, insects, and deer, but the garrulous birds were highly visible, convenient targets for beleaguered humans at the mercy of nature.<sup>16</sup>

**EXTERMINATION.** There is ample evidence of the overt extermination of this species, with some of the most graphic stories of its slaughter coming from John James Audubon, himself. As with the prairie dog in modern day Colorado, these birds were shot even as a part of contests between humans, with prizes given to the most adept killers. According to several reports, the largest number of birds killed with one shotgun blast in a contest was 22. But killing to protect agriculture was not the only threat to the birds' survival.

**FASHION.** Carolina parakeet feathers and skins were sold or traded, mostly to the millinery industry. In the days before indoor plumbing and aisles of hair-care products on store shelves, most people wore hats or other hair coverings most of the time. Bright green tail and wing feathers of the Carolina parakeet adorned stylish hats during the 1800s and early 1900s. Sometimes the bright birds themselves adorned hats, sometimes they were dyed black. Stuffed Carolina parakeets also decorated fashionable Victorian living rooms or "parlors" as they were called. The excesses of this period shaped the foundations of the conservation movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup>

**COLLECTABILITY.** In addition to threats from farmers, hunters and the fashion conscious, the Carolina parakeet became the subject of

great scientific scrutiny in the late 1800s. Extinction was a new concept introduced by anatomist Baron Georges Cuvier when discussing the newly found bones of a mammoth at the National Institute of Sciences and Arts in Paris in 1796. This radical concept flew in the face of predominant religious dogma of the time as it was then assumed that no “benevolent Creator” would allow any of His creation to disappear from the earth.<sup>18</sup> This debate culminated in the mid 1800s with publication of Charles Darwin’s studies of evolution. Whether or not Darwin and other scientists are correct about the evolutionary beginnings of life, there is ample evidence that many species that lived in the past no longer remain.

The Carolina parakeet was in the unenviable position of being the first species of animal predicted to become extinct even before that event. In their scientific zeal to study this extinction process, this “great biological event,” many biologists, ornithologists, and zoologists collected Carolina parakeet skins, sometimes actually participating in killing the birds. Even John James Audubon, a man whose name has become synonymous with the love and protection of bird wildlife, made most of his drawings from the skins of dead birds. It has been long suspected that the extinction of the Carolina parakeet was hastened by the taking of skins which now can be observed in numerous museums of natural history in the United States.

**CAPTIVE TRADE.** Although the Carolina parakeet was not known for a well developed ability to mimic, it was treasured in captivity and kept mostly in pairs, especially in zoos. Modern aviculture was still decades away from founding father, the Duke of Bedford, and the few reported attempts at captive reproduction were poorly accommodated and mostly unsuccessful.

### DOODLES

Robert Ridgway, one of the ornithologists who predicted the extinction of the Carolina parakeet, attempted to accommodate their captive breeding. At one time, a clutch of four babies resided in his parlor in a basket lined with cheesecloth. The parents were ignoring a particular nestling, and Ridgway offered it to Paul Bartsch, a guest in his home. In fact, Ridgway insisted that Bartsch take the chick. Of that clutch this chick alone survived.

Bartsch, a pioneer in bird banding, called his bird "Doodles" and wrote many glowing stories of life with a companion Carolina parakeet: Doodles and the pet squirrel, Doodles cuddling Bartsch neck, Doodles sleeping with Bartsch, even Doodle's escape adventure. The story including a photo of this beloved pet and a "Mr. Bryan" dated 1906 is published in Christopher Cokinos' wonderful book, *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers*.

**COMPETITION FOR HABITAT.** The demise of the Carolina parakeet was probably only hastened by overt killing. As with most threatened parrots today, loss of nest sites precipitated and ensured the birds' extinction. Although a few reports say that Carolina parakeets could build nests, more confirmed accounts indicate that it was a cavity breeder, and cavity breeders are dependent on conservation of nesting areas to survive.

Introduction of the European honeybee might have contributed more to the loss of the Carolina parakeet than all the guns and hats and pet collectors combined. This social and industrious insect was more prolific than the k-strategist conures that reproduced slowly and under conditions lost to us today. Honeybees actually spread ahead of the human settlers who introduced them. Native Americans in a particular locale could foresee the coming of Europeans to their particular lands

by the arrival of “the white man’s fly” as bees were known to them.<sup>19</sup> Cavity breeding parrots worldwide still compete with European bees for nest sites.

### **THE LAST WILD SIGHTINGS**

In the spring of 1926 Charles Doe, then curator of birds at the University of Florida, located three pairs of parrots in Okeechobee County, FL and identified them as Carolina Parakeets. No birds were collected, but he did find and take five eggs which are now in the university museum. Nicholson (1948) points out that the eggs could be those of a Mexican species, a number of which were reported to have escaped from captivity in Miami; and as no birds were collected, the authenticity of the record was not established.<sup>20</sup>

Reported sightings during 1934-1935 in wild swamp country along the Antee River, South Carolina, prompted two eminent ornithologists, Alexander Sprunt and Robert Porter Allen, to visit the area in late 1936 in an attempt to find the birds. Details of their parrot sightings, as given in Allen’s report for the National Audubon Society, did not convince other ornithologists, who dismissed the records. Allen later changed his mind and rejected his own report, saying that birds observed flying overhead at dusk were probably mourning doves. On the other hand, Sprunt maintained that they were Carolina parakeets. This nesting habitat, also home to the now-extinct ivory-billed woodpecker, was significantly altered with the construction of the massive Santee-Cooper Hydro-electric Project from 1939-1942.<sup>21</sup>

**∞∞∞∞ Mattie Sue's Memories ∞∞∞∞****THE DENVER SKINS**

In the 1980s I was allowed to hold a Carolina parakeet in my hand when I toured the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. During that time, a huge new addition to the museum was under construction, and many walls were torn down causing an escape of some of the hardest working members of the palentological team, the dermestids. Members of the mealworm family, dermistids are used to clean flesh off of bones. A Rocky Mountain News article reported that the bird skin collection had been damaged by an infestation of dermestids. The editorialized newspaper account questioned whether the Museum of Natural History staff was adequately protecting and maintaining the skin collection.

I inspected the damaged skins as Education Coordinator for the Rocky Mountain Society of Aviculture. A museum employee led the way through a door marked "Staff Only" and a maze of hallways to a room containing a wall of shallow hardwood drawers holding hundreds of bird skins. After donning rubber gloves, I was invited to examine the two skins said to have suffered the most damage. What remained of the bird in my hand was light. The feathers were there, the feet were there; beyond that, I had to agree that as nearly as I could tell, damage to the dead bird was only "slight." Several perfect skins remained.

However, holding that long-dead bird in my hand, reading the tag "collected at Sallisaw, Indian Territory, 1904," was the most moving experience of my life up to that moment. I wanted to know that what happened to the Carolina parakeet

couldn't happen again, that there would never be another "need" for humans to kill *every* bird of a particular kind.

I was overwhelmed with questions.

If we could kill every prairie dog on the planet, should we? What would the hawks and falcons that live on them eat?

If we could kill every rat on the planet, should we? What would the creatures that eat rats eat?

Would we miss those creatures?

How far does this go?

If we could kill off every "pest" species, would unforeseen consequences ultimately destroy every living thing?



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