

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