

At this point, I started looking closely at cell towers. My friend was right. From what I could see, Monk Parakeets were indeed leap-frogging across the city and suburbs via cell towers. A couple of weeks later, I read Vernon Kleen's 2003 Breeding Season Report (Kleen 2004) in which he stated: "A contributor mentioned that the Monk Parakeet population may be expanding; however, appropriate documentation and supportive field notes were not provided for this report." After reading this statement, I knew it was time that someone got the Monk Parakeet expansion down on paper.

Chicago Arrival

Monk Parakeets are native to South America, breeding from Bolivia east and south through Paraguay and Uruguay, and south to the Rio Negro of Argentina (Meyer de Schauensee 1970). Over the years, thousands of Monk Parakeets have been imported legally to the United States for sale as pets. Inevitably, some of these imported birds have been released or have escaped into the wild. The first free-flying Monk Parakeets in the New York metropolitan area were reported in 1967 (Neidermyer & Hickey 1977), and the first Chicago-area sighting occurred in 1973 (South 1999).

There is some debate as to how Monk Parakeets first arrived in Chicago. According to urban legend the parakeets originally escaped from a damaged shipping crate at O'Hare International Airport, but it is at least as likely that the original Chicago birds were pets that were either intentionally released or able to escape from captivity (South & Pruett-Jones 2000). Concerns that the Monk Parakeet might become a significant agricultural pest led to a U.S. Department of Agriculture effort to extirpate the birds from the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago in 1988. The local reaction was the formation of a citizen's group (founded by Doug Anderson, a former Chicago Audubon Society president) which demanded public hearings to determine if the birds posed a danger to Illinois crops. The Department of Agriculture eventually backed away from its removal efforts (Moskoff 2003). Since that time, the Chicago parakeets have continued to flourish, and Monk Parakeet was officially added to the Checklist of Illinois State Birds in 1999 (IORC 1999).

Plumage and behavior

Monk Parakeets are about twelve inches long, with a silvery-gray forehead, face, and breast, and bright green upperparts. The tail is long. At close range, the birds are easily identified by these characteristics. In flight, the birds appear to be roughly the same size and shape as Mourning Dove (*Zenaidura macroura*), but the parakeet's large-headed appearance and uniquely stiff wing-beats easily separate it from that species.

Monk Parakeets are unique among parrots in that they build massive, freestanding, communal stick nests; all other members of the parrot family nest in tree holes or cavities (Neidermyer & Hickey 1977, Sibley 2000). Because these massive communal nests are large and easy to see at a distance, I decided to track the expansion of Chicago-area Monk Parakeets by seeking out their nests.



A Monk Parakeet adds sticks to its nest in LaGrange Park (Cook County). Photo taken in 2004 by Abby Misen.

2004 Monk Parakeet Nest Surveys

During the second half of 2004, I tracked the spread of Chicago-area Monk Parakeets by doing a survey of their nest locations. Since it had become apparent that Monk Parakeets were actively using cell towers as nest sites, it seemed relatively easy to simply check Chicago-area cell towers for Monk Parakeet nests via surveys by car.

I conducted Monk Parakeet nest surveys on 4 and 11 July; 3 and 24 October; and 11, 20, and 28 November 2004. Since most Monk Parakeet nests at least appeared to be concentrated on the south side of Chicago and adjacent suburbs, I (somewhat arbitrarily) concentrated my efforts in these areas. Surveys were conducted by driving down major east-west streets at one mile intervals and checking cell towers for nests. Cell towers are very tall and Monk Parakeet nests are very obvious, so it was not at all difficult for me to detect Monk nests even at a distance of several city blocks. Moreover, major Chicago streets are purposely gridded at one mile (eight block) intervals (e.g. 111th St., 119th St.), facilitating my car surveys.