

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. Govern-

ment 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