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Monk parakeets are a fun, outdoor surprise

By **Gary Clark** | December 11, 2015

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Photo: Kathy Adams Clark

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Monk parakeets build huge, heavy nests atop tall utility towers.

Monk parakeets have been around the Houston area for more than 30 years, but many people are still surprised when they see a flock of the bright-green birds in their neighborhood.

Perhaps it's that we assume parrots are in cages or are living in the tropical wilds of their native Latin America. Also, we can't exactly saunter outside and see the jaunty parakeets as easily as we'd see blue jays.

The tropical birds often nest atop tall utility towers - not an easy place to look - and they crowd into trees unnoticed until they start squawking.

Monk parakeets are nearly a foot long and have gray faces and breasts, yellowish-brown beaks and long, graduated tails. The "monk" of their name derives from a monk-style hooded appearance.

The parrots feast on wild seeds, fruits, berries, nuts and plant buds. When seeds become scarce in winter, the birds might descend on backyard bird feeders.

No one knows when monk parakeets were first brought to the U.S. from their South American homeland. We do know the pet trade imported more than 60,000 birds, mostly from Uruguay and Argentina, between the late 1960s and early 1970s.



Thousands of birds escaped in 1968 from damaged shipping crates at New York's JFK Airport. They also may have broken out of crates in other places. Many owners of pet monk parakeets also let them loose after tiring of their clamorous calls.

The freed and stalwart monk parakeets quickly spread across the country and live in at least 14 states, with the largest populations in Florida and Texas.

"In Texas, they are most common in towns and cities southeast of a line extending from Dallas to Austin, San Antonio, Laredo and including Houston," said Dan Brooks, curator of vertebrate zoology at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. "Some of the most concentrated populations in our region are in Bellaire, communities along upper Galveston Bay, like League City, and some areas surrounding downtown," Brooks said.

While South American farmers curse monk parakeets as pests to their grain crops, the same cannot be said here, Brooks said.

Nor do they intrude on native bird life because they occupy urban niches, including places with invasive ornamental tropical vegetation not favored by native species.

Yet their big bundles of stick nests on power poles can damage the lines and knock out electricity. So utility companies maintain crews to remove the nests; they send any chicks to aviculturists.

Having settled into Houston and other cities, monk parakeets may become ordinary invasive birds,

MORE INFORMATION

Nature notes: monk parakeets

Folk name "quaker parrots" derives from baby birds uttering a quaking food-begging call.

It's the only parrot species that builds outdoor stick nests instead of cavity nests.

Birds often build large permanent nests in tall trees and on power poles.

Nests may contain chambers for year-round communal dwelling.

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