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President’s Message
It’s difficult to think nesting season when “we northern folks” are still waiting for the
migrants that we saw in southern Illinois during our
annual meeting to make their way north. By all
accounts, the meeting, held the last weekend in
April, was a great success; more than 200 Illinois
Audubon Society (IAS) and IOS members
attended. The weather was great and the field
trips were superb. We enjoyed many migratory birds
and wild flowers as well as excellent presentations.
A successful meeting does not happen all by
itself and requires lots of hard work by a
group of people and those individuals need to be
recognized. Organizing this joint meeting was
Joe Szeches for IOS and Marilyn Campbell of
IAS. Marilyn and her office staff did a superb
job of handling registration, and Keith McMullen
and his committee did an equally superb job
organizing the field trips. The facilities at the
Sand Lake Resort were great and the staff and
caterers were most helpful.

Many others contributed to the success of
the meeting that need to be recognized. Thanks to
all of you who helped. A complete report on
the meeting may be found in the newsletter.

If you haven’t visited one of our fine state
park lodges and resorts, you should plan to do
so soon. Also mark your calendars for our Year
2000 Annual Meeting the third weekend in May at
Illinois Beach State Park, where we motorists
are planning to show the southerners a great
time and some special birds of our own: in the
meantime, don’t forget to bird during nesting
season. You’ll find as many surprises during June,
July and August as you do during migration
periods. It just requires more effort.

Until next time — good birding.

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Purple Gallinules illustration by David L. Adams. See Frank
Bennett’s Mermet Lake nesting story on page 11.
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 quadrang. 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. Just as quickly the color disappeared amid the dark branches. Later I learned I had seen the gregarious Monk Parakeet (Myiopsitta monachus), after a tax driver alerted me to the huge flock of crabapples near New York. The parakeets mimic an apple and crop feeding with their claws and beak. Photos taken in the summer of 1996 in Hyde Park by Jason South.

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reported 1,186 birds from 76 localities in 15 states in 1994-95, while they had reported a mere 33 birds in 1975-76. Most of the Monk Parakeet (1,163 or 80.6%) sightings in 1994-95 came from two states, Florida and Texas. These data fit the standard equation of exponential growth (Van Buiel & Pruett-Jones 1996).

**Chicag0 population**

The winter of 1998, I counted 48 nests in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, and the summer of 1998, I noticed many new nests as well as previously existing nests that had grown. There were 83 active chambers in these nests, but the number is certainly larger now. Since Monk Parakeets are monogamous and roost in their stick nests year-round (Fordham 1999), a fair estimate of the Hyde Park population the winter of 1998 would be 170 Monk Parakeets (although one or two young often stay in the chamber with the parents until the next spring). However, several large nests were removed from utility poles in late October and early November. One of these nests contained at least 20 nesting chambers and rivaled a large appliance in size. These nests could have harbored from 60-90 more individuals, bringing the total population of Monk Parakeets in Hyde Park closer to 240.

While Monk Parakeets have bred continuously in Hyde Park for almost 20 years, they have also appeared in several other Chicagoland locations. Nesting has been confirmed in 1998 in Carol Stream (although nests have repeatedly been removed by the electric company), Bensenville, Harwpm, North Riverside, Calumet Park, and Burnham. Most nesting colonies outside of Hyde Park contain only one or two nests, but in Burnham there are at least seven (unpub data, pers. comm. from Chicago-area birders). It is not known whether the parakeets in Hyde Park are a source population for the other sites.

I suspect that there has been more than one escape or release, as one study in Argentina documented a median dispersal from natal nest to first breeding location as only 1,230 meters (Martin & Bacher 1993). At least two locations are obvious points of introduction: O'Hare Airport and Hyde Park. Additionally, Monk Parakeets have been observed in free-flight in Addison, at Fermi Laboratory (DuPage County), in Zion (Lake County) where they nested, in Blue Island, and in downtown Grant Park.

Clearly the Monk Parakeet has established itself in Chicago. Only a vigorous, sustained effort could dislodge this species; that's, if you could win the sympathies of the general public that adores its parakeets. When the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced plans to eradicate the
Hyde Park's 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 Mayor Washington was very fond of the birds that nested outside his apartment, and compared their experience to the plight of African-Americans in the 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 palms in Florida, both tall trees with limited hiding spaces for predators (Spryer & Bucker 1998). Utility poles are also very tall and have no obstructions between the nest and the ground. Furthermore, the lattice of support 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 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 for those lives near a large group of nests. A few residents also complain of the fallen sticks they must remove and of the pollination 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 localizing. The next offer shelter during the winter, but the parakeets may survive the coldest months solely on bird seed provided by man (Golen & Pruett-Lones 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 provide conflicting views of Monk Parakeets. One study in Brazil found that in a colony of Monk Parakeets nesting in closely cropped fields, cultivated corn and wheat made up 84% and 10.3% of their diet, respectively (Dulheim 1984). 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 parakeets, especially Monk Parakeets, is often overstated. Government assistance is often at stake, and it is much easier to see bright green birds foraging in the crops than small insects. Poor agricultural practices may also lead to the most serious damage (Bucholz 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 Paerta 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 white oddity, like the rare white deer from China that roam the grounds of Meadowlark.
Editor's Note: The Illinois Ornithological Records Committee, in 1996, officially placed the Monk Parakeet on the Illinois State Checklist of Birds. The committee used this paper to help in its decision.

Literature Cited


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The Monk Parakeet (Myiopsitta monachus) is now an official member of the Illinois State Checklist. This photo, taken by Jason South, shows a Monk Parakeet sitting on a nest in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago the summer of 1998. For an article by South about the status of Monk Parakeets in Illinois, see pages 2-5 inside.