



**CLAIMING A SPOT:** While our native Carolina Parakeet, depicted by Audubon on the opposite page, is long extinct, Red-masked Parakeets and other members of



# *The wild parrots of America*

Thousands of free-flying parrots of more than 20 species are challenging the way we think about invasive and native birds and even ornithological history

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHARLES BERGMAN





READY TO GO: Red-crowned Parrots await release from rehabbers in San Diego. Below, a Red-masked Parakeet and a Red-crowned Parrot squabble over a nest.

## “This is no mission town,”

Josh Bridwell laughs. He and his wife, Brooke Durham, run SoCal Parrot, a wild-parrot rescue in San Diego. Durham is in the passenger seat of the SUV. In the back are several dog carriers. But we’re not carrying dogs. We’ve got parrots, we’re driving down a strip mall, and they’re on their way to freedom.

It’s an unlikely place to find parrots, which in popular culture are often associated with the tropical good life of palm trees and sunsets. The birds will join a big flock in a decidedly urban environment — El Cajon, a community in San Diego.

“Hard to say what the parrots like about this,” Brooke laughs. “But we have about 500 of them living in this town.”

We turn into a parking garage, spiral up to the top floor, open to the sky, and find a spot. Somehow it seems right that we’re at the town courthouse. A small army of volunteers and onlookers has already gathered. They’re here to help, or watch, Durham and Bridwell release rehabilitated parrots into the wild. Technically it’s illegal.

There’s a touch of wild defiance in this gesture on behalf of parrots. Durham has her own wild flare — with dyed dreadlocks and a parrot tattoo on her forearm. And enough charisma to draw an enthusiastic crowd of parrot fans to the event.

It’s more accurate to say that these releases — this is the third one — have helped draw attention to the many thousands of wild, introduced parrots in the United States.

“I just want to give the parrots a chance at a good life,” she says.

Long ignored and largely unstudied, the wild parrots of America are not your typical tropical parrots. Durham and Bridwell are challenging us to re-think our views of psittacines in America. With growing recognition of their numbers have come calls for more study and development of management plans. Their presence raises important questions about invasive species, endangered species, even the history of parrots in the United States.

It’s clear, from the celebrity reception Durham and Bridwell get at the parking garage, that attitudes toward the parrots are changing. They’ve certainly found advocates and unprecedented attention.



If you’re lucky enough to visit Kimball Garrett in his office, the first thing you’ll see, in a wilderness of books and stacked papers, is a huge reproduction of the famous John James Audubon painting of the Carolina Parakeet. It rests cock-eyed and precarious on piles of paper. It’s one of Audubon’s finest paintings. Eight Carolina Parakeets swirl on the page, exciting a sense of energy and action, a churn of yellow heads and green bodies. Audubon himself referred to them as “astonishing fits of nature” — the representation of high-strung, at times frenetic, psittacine energy.

The extinction of the Carolina Parakeet was one of America’s most famous. The last known bird, which was named Incas, died on February 21, 1918, in the Cincinnati Zoo, in the same cage as Martha, the last Passenger Pigeon, which died in 1914.

In Audubon’s painting, one parakeet turns toward us. You might almost believe it is set to fly off the page, out of extinction, and into our modern lives. I had come to Garrett’s office for help in finding a nest of parakeets in Los Angeles. I had not expected to come away feeling that I’d encountered a “return” of parakeets.

Garrett manages the ornithology collection at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, in the heart of the city. He’s considered one of the best birders in Southern California and the most knowledgeable person in the state on California’s parrots.

“That’s not really saying much,” he tells me. “There’s been very little work done on the introduced parrots. Very few

studies. There has just not been a reward for biologists to take them on.”

With a graying beard, flannel shirt, and binoculars — always binoculars — Garrett almost disappears in his office clutter. He tells me it should be easy to find parakeet nests in Los Angeles. We get in my rental car, and within five minutes we turn into the Angelus Rosedale Cemetery. It’s like driving into a scene of a Jack Nicholson movie about old Los Angeles. Mockingbirds sing from aging Chinese elms. Anna’s Hummingbirds try for nectar out of plastic flowers left on grave stones. And a pair of bluebirds brings grubs to their babies in a small cavity on a leafless tree.

In just a few minutes, Garrett has seen four parakeets in the elm with the mockingbird. I turn to see a green blur vanish in the cut fronds of a huge palm. Minutes later, two green flashes leave the fronds — a pair of parakeets at the nest.

“Yellow-chevroned Parakeets,” Garrett says. “Very widespread in the Los Angeles Basin. There are thousands of them and as many White-winged Parakeets. They are starting to hybridize.”

These parakeets are one of the most abundant of California’s 13 species of wild psittacines — the family that includes parrots, macaws, Amazons, conures, parakeets, cockatoos, cockatiels, and budgies.

No one has done a census of them, though Garrett has just published an article in *Western Birds* on the “introduced” species in California. The various flocks of parrots in California have been around since the 1950s and are populated by or descended from parrots that escaped the pet trade — legal and illegal. Back then, tens of thousands of wild-caught birds were being imported each year.

Scientists use a variety of criteria to determine if a species should be included on the official list of a region’s avifauna, whether local, federal, the American Birding Association, or the American Ornithological Society. They all include successful nesting and whether the population is self-sustaining.

“Only one so far has been placed on the official list of California’s avifauna — the Red-crowned Parrot,” says Garrett, who serves on one such committee. The other 12 remain in a kind of twilight zone, present but not acknowledged.

“I’m pretty sure most, if not all, would qualify,” he adds.

That’s important because that would make them eligible for resources and protection.

Paradoxically, the parrots are wild but intimately associated with humans. They are urban birds, relying on plants and trees that are not native to California.

They are the birds of the urban wild. The significance of the birds’ dependence on urban environments and human plantings can’t be overstated. It means, in a word, they are not “invasive.”

They do not compete with or displace native California birds.

Invasive species do damage, often to native fauna. Not the wild parrots. The language of invasive and alien species, with its vaguely military connotations, does not apply. Finding the right words is important. They have been called invasive, feral, introduced, non-native. Garrett uses “naturalized.”

Back in his office, Garrett asks if I’d like to see his lone skin of a Carolina Parakeet. “Of course,” I say without hesitation.

He pulls a stiff, flat-backed bird out of a white drawer. Extinction may be forever, and the Carolina Parakeet is dead and gone. But I could not help but feel that its legacy is not entirely dead. After decades of benign neglect, we’re realizing that parrots and parakeets have returned to the United States, rising as if from the dead, for me, in a cemetery in Los Angeles.



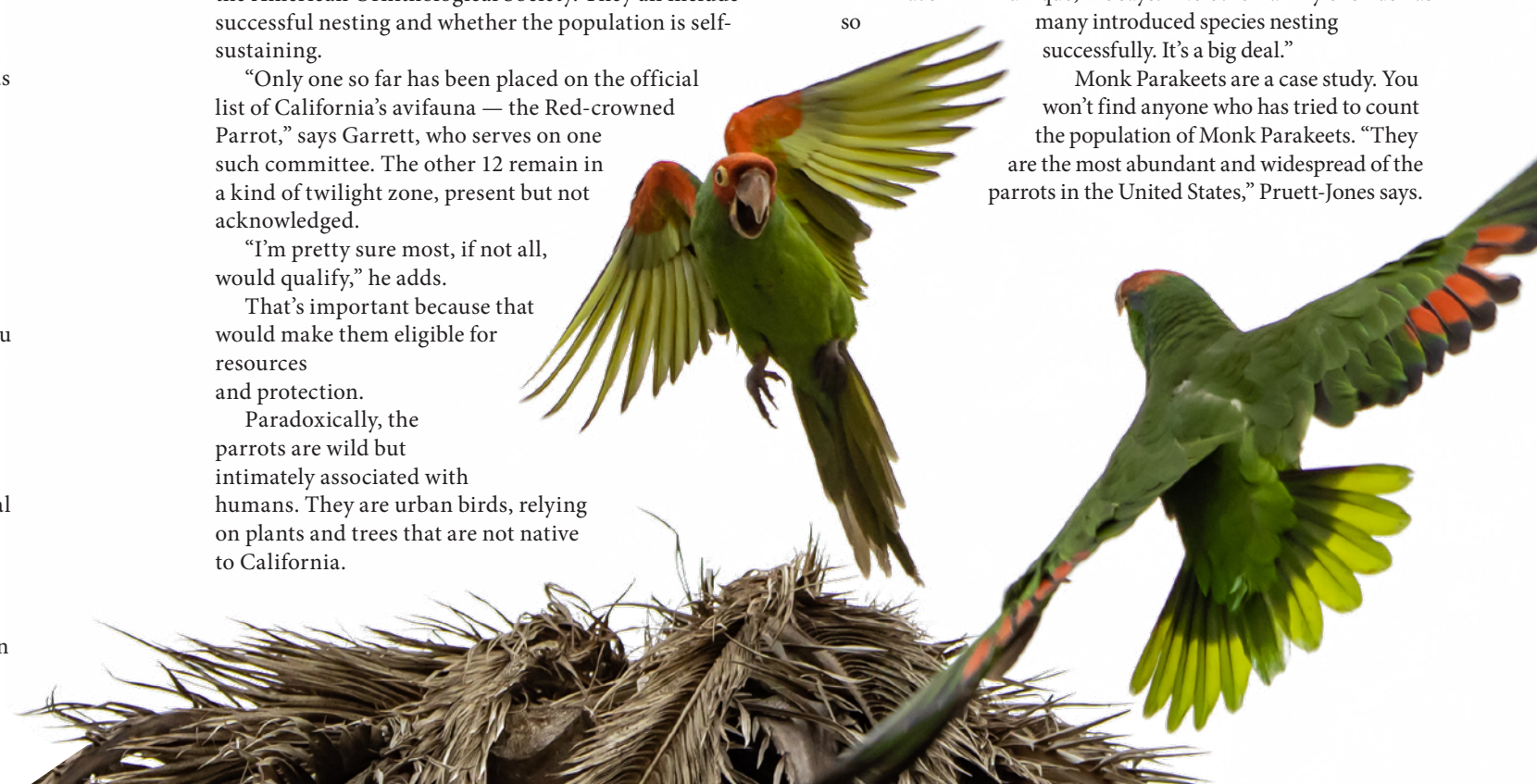
“To be clear,” Stephen Pruett-Jones says, “I haven’t seen a Monk Parakeet in six months.”

For 30 years, he has taught and conducted research in the evolution and ecology program at the University of Chicago. His principle research is on Fairy Wrens in Australia. But he has published on the Monk Parakeets of Cook County, Illinois, and that makes him, despite the disclaimer, an expert on naturalized parrots. He’s even working on a book about naturalized parrots in the United States. According to Pruett-Jones, 75 species of parrots were introduced into this country through the pet trade. Of those, 31 are still regularly seen.

And of those, 23 species are nesting successfully here.

“That’s unique,” he says. “No other family of birds has so many introduced species nesting successfully. It’s a big deal.”

Monk Parakeets are a case study. You won’t find anyone who has tried to count the population of Monk Parakeets. “They are the most abundant and widespread of the parrots in the United States,” Pruett-Jones says.





**A LIGHT TOUCH** Ornithologist Kimball Garrett of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County holds one of his institution's many parrot specimens.

For no apparent reason, other than to entertain itself, one of the conures does a full 360-degree spin on a bare branch. You could hear the birds gurgle to each other. They touch beaks and turn toward the two Red-crowned Parrots — a psittacine stare-down.

“There are probably multiple chambers in that nest,” Lesley Handa tells me. We’re here to see the birds she is dedicated to. An independent researcher, she is “keeping an eye” on these parrots to have an idea of the population dynamics over time. It’s informal, really. Her main project, she tells me, is waterbirds in San Diego. “I like birds no one else likes.”

That made these parrots ideal objects for her affection. She has brought me to see an amazing scene. Parrots are everywhere in

“They are considered ‘agricultural pests’ in their native Argentina. But there are virtually no studies here of breeding, flock size, foraging behavior — their biology and ecology.” He published a 40-year perspective on the Monk Parakeets in Chicago. “Their numbers grew exponentially over time,” he says, estimating their population at 15,000 to 20,000.

“It’s a controversial bird,” he says, “and that’s a big number to go unstudied, for a species with a big potential for damage. They are famous for building enormous nests on power lines. In one five-month period in 2001 in Florida, 198 Monk Parakeet nests collapsed on power lines.

“Some people want to kill them,” he says, “and some people love them.”

You can take tours of Monk Parakeet roosting sites in Chicago. People feed them in their backyards. And supporters of Monk Parakeets have introduced bills to protect them in New York and New Jersey.

Wild or naturalized parrots in America are, says Pruettt-Jones, “a lot like coyotes. They provoke a wide range of emotional reactions people have toward animals — a contradictory and divergent range.”



Two Red-crowned Parrots are hunkered on the eaves of the local Union Bank, keeping a careful eye on a dying date-nut palm tree just across the sidewalk. Their eyes are alert, fixed on two Red-masked Conures, smaller birds with long tails, shining green plumage, and red faces. The conures occupy the entrance to an enormous cavity in a palm tree.

the charming beach town: in trees, flying between trees, hanging from palm fronds, flying overhead. Every palm on Niagara Avenue in Ocean Beach is occupied. There must be more than 500 of the birds in this community, and they give every indication that they are here to stay. A pair of parrots emerges from a cavity a block away, looking still groggy from sleeping in. Another small group flies from one palm across an intersection and adorns a small shrub in front of a house.

One of the parrots on the bank eaves leaps upward and locks onto a long-dead frond sticking from the palm. The second bird flies up on labored wings and disappears on the far side of the fronds. The counterattack to re-take the cavity has begun.

“People tend to turn their noses up at these parrots,” Handa says. “Like they don’t belong here.”

That has not stopped the parrots from moving in, taking over every palm in sight, and settling in, noisy and colorful. We are at the epicenter of one of the largest colonies of naturalized parrots in California and perhaps in the country.

This single tree illustrates the big issue with these wild parrots. At its base is painted a white X. The tree is dying, and the city scheduled it for removal. But the people of Ocean Beach mounted a successful campaign to save the nest tree for the parrots.

Attitudes seem to be changing. People have grown to love the parrots. Over and over again, people stopped to ask what I was photographing. I’d point out the parrots, and the common response was: “awesome.”

Nevertheless, the parrots raise complex conservation questions. In Texas, for example, a flock of about 680

**MAKING ITSELF AT HOME:** A Yellow-chevroned Parakeet hangs from a palm frond before entering its nest in L.A. The species is native from Brazil to northern Argentina.



Red-crowned Parrots has established itself in the Rio Grande Valley on the border with Mexico. Simon Kiacz, a graduate student at Texas A&M University, is part of a team studying them — the Tejano Parrot Project.

In Mexico, the species is endangered, but more Red-crowned Parrots are in the United States than in their native Mexico. “That creates a weird circumstance of having more of these Amazons in the U.S. than in their native land, Mexico,” Kiacz says. (Birds in the genus *Amazona*, including Red-crowned Parrot, are collectively known as Amazons.)

In the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, only a few hundred survive.

Texas Parks and Wildlife has already declared the parrot a “native,” and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering listing it as endangered in the United States.

If declared endangered, the parrots would be in a fairly unique situation. Very few endangered species are backyard birds, as these parrots are. People will no longer be able to trim palms if parrots nest in them. Parties in the backyard? Not possible if they might disturb nesting parrots.

Additionally, the parrots are important to the South Texas economy. There’s an annual parrot festival. Tour buses take people to the roost sites, 60 people in a bus. Photographers come to take their photos.

On top of all this, Kiacz knows that poachers take chicks from parrot nests. Young birds are showing up in local markets — enough to make it a high concern.

“Listing will create real dilemmas,” Kiacz notes.

Meanwhile, in Ocean Beach, the Red-masked Conures are dive bombing the Red-crowned Parrots. Suddenly, it’s an all-out dogfight in the sky. The parrots are bigger but no match for the speed and maneuverability of the conures. The faster conures prevail, and the parrots retreat to the bank. The conures return to the nest and preen each other.

Audubon’s description of parrots as “astonishing fits of nature” certainly seems apt.

As I watch, a woman approaches. She lives in the house fronting the nest. “We love these birds,” she says. She describes saving the tree. “These parrots may not be indigenous to here,” she says. “But they are a part of us here.”



In El Cajon, Brooke Durham and Josh Bridwell supervise a successful release. When the doors open, the 38 Red-crowned Parrots waste no time launching into flight. In mere seconds, they mingle among the flying birds and merge with the flock — the mark of success.

Durham is a leading member of a group of advocates for these “newly native” birds. As the birds leave, she tells me that in Texas, the Red-crowned may have been a native species. As researchers track down records, they’ve found reports of parrots in the state from the late 1800s. In Mexico, they live about 150 miles or so from the border, so it’s not far-fetched to think they would be native to the U.S.

If confirmed, this would be big news, because it would revise the commonly accepted knowledge that only two parrot species were native to the United States — the extinct Carolina Parakeet and the extirpated Thick-billed Parrot.

Perhaps one day we’ll have an answer. For now, whether the birds that took off from the top of a parking garage are native or not, they’re free among the wild parrots of America. 🦜

*Charles Bergman is a professor of English at Pacific Lutheran University and a frequent contributor to BirdWatching. In past issues, he has written about penguins, Vaux’s Swift, Red Crossbill, Spotted and Barred Owls, and Tufted Puffin. His most recent book is A Penguin Told Me a Secret.*