

**The Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*):**

**An argument against eradication  
of the feral of this species in the UK.**

A report by Christine Brock and Simon J Richardson

(October 2011)

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# 1 Summary

- Monk parakeets should not be confused with the larger more prolific rose-ring or ring-necked parakeet. In appearance and behaviour the two species are very different.
- There were only approximately 77 monk parakeets UK wide at the beginning of 2011, before DEFRA began their eradication programme earlier this year.
- Monk parakeets were first seen in Borehamwood in 1993 and are believed to have originated from a house burglary.
- Although DEFRA have stated they will re-home trapped birds, nestlings and adult birds have been killed and eggs destroyed using the “most sensible approach to dispatch”.
- The first 4 birds trapped in Borehamwood were killed on site.
- Birds were shot during field trials in 2008 at a cost of £37,000. This year birds were shot and maimed at Allum Lane Spinney using experimental copper shot cartridges.
- At a time of austerity this year DEFRA is spending £90,000 to eradicate 77 birds.
- It is still legal to import monk parakeets into this country and sell them via the pet trade. If the alleged threats posed by the birds are so great why hasn't the law been changed to prohibit this? Further escapees are inevitable.
- The report on monk parakeets produced by the GB Non Native Species Secretariat indicates the threats posed by the birds are relatively minor.
- In New York USA legislation to protect their monk parakeets is being enacted.
- In New Jersey USA legislation to remove the monk parakeets from the “potentially dangerous species” list has been passed by the Assembly.
- DEFRA appears to have shown little respect for the terms of the Natural England General Licence by suggesting in correspondence that the birds could be shot for “crapping” on residents' property and feeding on garden shrubs and trees.
- DEFRA and its sister quangos make conflicting statements about the programme of action against the monk parakeets. Natural England states that it is not calling for the eradication of the species. FERA states that actions it is taking are an eradication programme.
- Monk parakeet populations in New York USA are observed to be self limiting or stable.
- Here in the UK monk parakeets are slow to expand and susceptible to winter mortality and predation by crows and magpies.
- Monk parakeets do not compete with other species for nesting sites (unlike the ring-necked parakeet) and actually share their nests with other species including house sparrows here in the UK, helping to support this species.

- Unlike pigeon droppings, monk parakeet droppings do no damage to brownstone structures. There is no evidence their droppings pose more of a health hazard than those of any other animal.
- Monk parakeets have not nested on electricity pylons in the UK. The infrastructure here is different from the US where cables and transformers are above ground in towns. In the UK cables are in the main below ground. Simple cheap orange tape and pole covers used in the US act as deterrents there.
- Monk parakeets are grass seed eaters. They do not venture into the countryside, preferring suburban bird tables as a food source. No agricultural damage by these birds has been reported in the UK.
- The opinion of the RSPB supporting DEFRA's eradication programme is likely to be biased given multi-million pound research funding provided to them by DEFRA.
- In view of the above we specifically ask the Hertsmere Executive to make their suspension of permission for DEFRA to carry out any activities on Council owned land and property permanent.
- DEFRA must cease the eradication programme and all shooting must immediately stop.
- The monk parakeets should be monitored but left alone.
- Further "independent" research into monk parakeets needs to be carried out.

# The Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*): an argument against eradication of the feral of this species in the UK.

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## 2 Introduction

The monk or Quaker parakeet (Figure 1) is a small, parrot-like bird originating from South America. They are approximately 12 inches long (29 cm) with a wingspan of 20 inches (53 cm) and weigh 3–4 ounces (90–120 g). They have thick, yellow-brown beaks, bright green tails and backs and their flight feathers are blue to bluish-black. Their faces, throats, chests, and legs are pale gray. Juveniles are a brighter green than the adults. The plumage of monk parakeets is similar in both sexes throughout the year; juveniles may be brighter green (Johnson and Logue 2009).

They should not be confused with the larger, more prolific rose-ring or ring-necked parakeet. The male of this species has a distinctive red ring around its neck (Figure 2).



Figure 1 Monk parakeet © Clive Butchins



Figure 2  
Rose ring parakeet

In the USA feral populations have been documented in 14 states but they tend to disappear almost as soon as they arrive. They mainly populate the warm, southern states but there are also colonies in New York City, Chicago and Connecticut. Introduced populations are found predominantly in urban and suburban areas (Johnson and Logue 2009).

According to Butler (2002) feral monk parakeets were first seen in Borehamwood, Hertfordshire in 1993 and the population had increased steadily to 32 individuals by 2001 (Butler 2002). The UK population is currently at around 33. Fifteen nest in Borehamwood and around 18 in The Isle of Dogs and there are believed to be a few scattered around.

## 2.1 Habits

Foraging is on the ground and in trees. It feeds on nuts, seeds, fruit, blossom and sometimes insect larvae. Nests are communal, consisting of multiple chambers and are built from sticks (Sol *et al.* 1997).

Monk parakeets are selective in their habitats, preferring the tallest trees – such as palms in Spain (Sol *et al.* 1997), eucalyptus trees and tall conifers (Figure 3). It appears they like to be as high up as possible in order to avoid predation (see UK electricity pylons section).



Figure 3 ©Clive Butchins

## 2.2 As pets

This highly intelligent social species with a very large vocabulary and an instinct for neatness (Athan 2007) is popular as pets. They are trapped in huge numbers in their native South America and sold to the pet trade (Bucher 1990). It is legal for these birds to be sold by the pet Industry in the UK, so perpetuating the risk of escape.

## 3 History of Campaign

DEFRA are saying that monk parakeets could pose a threat to crops, other species and electricity pylons. Residents became aware earlier this year of the proposed eradication operation by DEFRA. Many found this alarming as they view the birds as an attractive and charming addition to the town and feel they are as much a part of Borehamwood's heritage as the film industry.

In a plea to stop the cull of monk parakeets in Borehamwood and the rest of the UK nearly 2,000 signatures, which were hand signed by local people in Borehamwood, and an additional 2,179 signatures from the UK and elsewhere, were presented to No. 10 Downing Street (Figure 4) on 20<sup>th</sup> August 2011 by campaigners Simon Richardson and Christine Brock, and Councillors Pat Strack, Richard Butler, Sandra Parnell and Clive Butchins acting on behalf of outraged Borehamwood residents.

Signatures were collected in various shops over a period of only about 10 weeks, an indication of local feeling in such a short period of time.



Monk parakeets have been living in the wild in Borehamwood and elsewhere, notably the Isle of Dogs, for many years (since the 1990s) and have barely increased in number during that time; not least they have not done any damage or interfered with native species. There are now only around 15 birds in Borehamwood out of approximately 33 in the UK. A large proportion of the residents of Borehamwood and many in the UK and elsewhere are outraged by the action of DEFRA.

DEFRA/FERA have gone against what they have said publicly (i.e. to remove these birds from the wild using non lethal methods) and instead are culling them.

Figure 4 Campaigners present a petition to Downing St

Because of so-called logistical issues the "most sensible approach to despatch" is used and birds and chicks have been killed. This is in addition to some that were shot during a field trial in Borehamwood in 2008. Furthermore, shooting at the birds has been attempted on the Isle of Dogs. Petitioners are not satisfied with this approach as little effort has been made to contact nearby secure aviaries.

After spending £37,000 of tax payers money on the field trials in Borehamwood in 2008, which trialled the use of trapping and shooting measures, DEFRA returned to Borehamwood in June this year and proceeded to shoot the birds at Allum Lane Spinney using "experimental" copper shot gun cartridges which maimed but did not kill the birds.

Through freedom of information requests we have subsequently discovered that the birds shot and killed in 2008 were experimented on and used for analysis.

Particularly outrageous is that, in times of austerity, DEFRA is spending approximately £1000 per bird for this eradication programme this year when anyone can still go to a pet shop, buy a monk parakeet and then release it. It is a gross waste of public money. If DEFRA's scientific evidence is sound and monk parakeets are such a danger, why have they not been banned from being sold in this country as further escapees will be inevitable?

Reasons for the eradication of the monk parakeets in the UK are not based on hard evidence: *There is a paucity of published research on the feral populations of these introduced species in the UK and further work is needed to produce an evidence base to inform management decisions* (Tayleur 2010). DEFRA claims the birds could pose a danger to crops, electricity pylons and other species. However, the report on monk

parakeets, produced by the GB Non-Native Species Secretariat, indicates that the threats posed by the birds are relatively minor. Previous populations existing elsewhere in the UK have died out naturally. The tiny population in the UK has been carefully monitored and is known to be in decline. They are slow to expand, preferring to remain in urban areas and will not forage further than their nesting vicinity for food. After 15 years there is no evidence of the predicted widespread agricultural or environmental damage.

In New York, which, like the UK, is also at a more temperate latitude than the monk parakeet problem areas, there are only 1000 of these birds after decades of colonisation in this large state. Contrary to the official opinion in the UK, they are not considered invasive and are afforded a protected status (New York State Senate 2011a; New York State Assembly 2011). Legislation in New Jersey to remove from list of “potentially dangerous species” has been adopted.

Particularly alarming is DEFRA’s attitude and lack of consistency in approach.

We bring to the attention of the Executive a passage from an email dated 15<sup>th</sup> July 2011, obtained by a freedom of Information request:

*MPs are on the general licences for crop damage/disease and conservation of flora/fauna*

*They can only be controlled for the purposes on the licence – i.e. not simply because they are making too much noise or because people don’t like the look of them. But as long as people are controlling them for one of these purposes they can kill adults, destroy eggs/young and destroy nests. I’m not sure how widely this is known and it would certainly be helpful if more people with MP problems were aware of this and prepared to act!*

*Droppings would do it if they were in a location that was causing a disease threat or a threat to human health/safety.*

*Whether damage to garden plants/trees would be sufficient is an interesting question. I think that the use of ‘flora and fauna’ in the W&CA and on the general licence is intended to refer to wild plants and animals rather than plants grown in a garden but there is no explanatory text and you could argue that ‘flora’ includes anything in the plant kingdom!*

*The wording of the livestock/crop damage general licence is ‘for the purposes of preventing SERIOUS damage to livestock, foodstuffs for livestock, crops, vegetables, fruit, growing timber....’ so damage to vegetables or fruit trees should do the trick although whether this could be deemed ‘serious damage’ if in the confines of a garden I’m not sure. I’ll have to leave that one to the lawyers.*

*So, presumably residents could kill monks for crapping on their property (disease prevention) and feeding on their garden shrubs/trees (flora conservation)?*

It is highly dangerous and irresponsible of DEFRA to hold a view that it would be reasonable for local residents could take it into their own hands to shoot at wildlife. It also appears from this passage that there is an implication of a subtle bending of the rules in relation to under what circumstances the General Licence could be used. Information received from DEFRA listing residents' attitudes to monk parakeets indicates that residents at Mildred Avenue C "Removed nest, shot two birds with airgun".

DEFRA, and its associated quangos FERA and Natural England, publish conflicting statements about their activities and "spin" a different story to different audiences.

In October 2009 Natural England issued a statement about changes to the licensing situation concerning monk parakeets from January 2010. *"Earlier this week, Natural England announced changes to the licensing situation, which will be implemented from 1 January 2010, regarding the control of monk and ring-necked parakeets. Some media reports have indicated that Natural England is calling for the eradication of these species. We are not."*

In response to a freedom of information request made in May this year, Mike Wray, Operations Director at FERA, a sister agency to Natural England, said in his reply dated 18<sup>th</sup> May 2011 *"I should clarify that this is not a trapping and re-homing project. The aim is to eradicate the feral population of monk parakeets by the most humane method appropriate to individual situations. It will therefore involve a range of techniques (as indicated above), the budget for which is £90k"*.

On the one hand we have Natural England stating that the policy is not one of eradication, and on the other we have the sister agency responsible for implementing the policy stating that it is an eradication policy. We should like to point out that the range of techniques referred to above includes trapping and shooting. Re-homing is only considered after "assessment". If feral monk parakeets show signs of stress in captivity they are destroyed. In addition the first four birds trapped in Borehamwood were killed on site with no effort made to re-home them.

In further correspondence received from Adrian Belton, Chief Executive of FERA, dated 1<sup>st</sup> August 2011 the operation is referred to as "Monk parakeet removal programme, Borehamwood". However the accompanying "Monk parakeets Q&A document dated 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2011 makes reference in the background section to a GB-wide policy framework where the second approach to dealing with the monk parakeets is stated as "to detect threats early and eradicate the species rapidly to prevent establishment".

This muddled thinking and conflicting statements is all the more alarming as we the tax payers are funding these organisations.



Although DEFRA have stated they try to re-home caught birds, 18 nestlings which were caught were destroyed. No attempt was made to re-home them.

We have made DEFRA aware of the Wildlife Ambulance and Rescue Service (WRAS) at Trent Park, Enfield. This is run by Barry and June Smitherman MBE. They have offered to take any trapped birds and/or

nestlings and rear them. They have secure aviaries. DEFRA have made no attempt to contact them and offer them any of the trapped birds or nestlings.

DEFRA's responses contain significant errors which create erroneous impressions about the numbers of monk parakeets. In response to our petition submission to the Prime Minister made on the 20<sup>th</sup> August 2011, DEFRA stated: "*Information suggests that the source of the present Borehamwood monk parakeet population was six birds in 1989. The population is reported to have increased to 15 birds by 1995, 24 birds by 1999, a minimum of 45 birds by 2003 and 77 birds in 2011*". However in the DEFRA progress report dated 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011 DEFRA refers to the number of monk parakeets in Borehamwood before the start of the current activity (February 2011) to eradicate them as "33-37". The total number of monk parakeets London wide is stated as "78-87". In addition DEFRA refers to Borehamwood as being in the "North London" region.

## **4 In response to DEFRA's arguments**

### ***4.1 Predicted population expansion***

DEFRA propose a model of the spread of monk parakeets in Spain as a basis for prediction of the economic and ecological impact of monk parakeets in the UK.

This reasoning is flawed. The climate is different from that of the UK. In New York State, where temperatures are similar to in the UK, observations over the past few years indicate that the populations are either self-limiting or are remaining stable with little increase. After about 5 decades the population has not reached more than 1000 in this large state (New York State Senate 2011a).

In 2000 J. Burgher and M. Gochfeld studied Monk Parakeet nests in various habitats in Florida, a tropical climate. Dr Gochfeld writes in his testimony letter to New Jersey Senate in 2007 "*The Parakeet population has been quite stable in the area from West Palm Beach to Miami over the period from about 1990 to 2002. The birds form a few local colonies, and are not widespread*" (Burger and Gochfeld 2000).

It is preposterous for DEFRA to compare the expansion of the ring-necked parakeet numbers, estimated at 30,000 in the UK over a period of 40 years, with a potential expansion of the monk parakeets over the same period. Monk parakeets in the UK are evidently much slower to expand. Their number over a period of nearly 20 years was less than 77 for the whole of the UK at the beginning of 2011. Compare also with New York, which has a similar temperature to the UK, where these birds have increased in number over a period of 50 years to only around 1,000 (New York State Senate 2011a).

Monk Parakeet behaviour is typical of K-strategists, not R-strategists, such as starlings, which have the potential to become ubiquitous. Monk Parakeet juveniles stay with their parents for a year or two and then leave to build their own families, typically no more than 50 yards from where they were born.

While their numbers may increase during the breeding season, it has been shown in Chicago USA that they usually decline to a stable baseline population due to winter mortality (Morimoto 2007: Appendix 2). In his letter dated 20<sup>th</sup> March 2007 to the New Jersey Senate in support of removal of Monk Parakeets from “potentially dangerous species” list Morimoto states: *“Given this information, monk parakeets cannot be unambiguously classified as an invasive species in the northern reaches of their distribution at this time. Enough interest in these birds exists to allow detailed monitoring that would prevent any transition to ‘invasiveness’. In the meantime, curtailing human activities like providing too much habitat and bird food for exotic species would be much more effective than removing birds for a reason that has not been scientifically validated”*.

Recent harsh winters here in the UK appear to have had this effect. The population in the UK has been in decline for some time. Although there has been regular dispute about the numbers, what is clear is that they started at 15 in Borehamwood in 1993 when they escaped from an aviary, were believed to reach a peak of 51 around 10 years ago and numbered 33 earlier this year (2011). They now number 15 again and not all of the population decrease can be attributed to DEFRA’s activities. A nest site in Borehamwood which is regularly observed is often “under attack” from magpies and crows. Natural predation in the UK also limits the population.

## **4.2 Competition with other species**

Quakers do not compete with other species for nesting sites. On the contrary they will happily share their large communal nests with a variety of creatures and have been known to share with bats, opossums and geese (Athán 2007) as well as house sparrows here in the UK. According to the New York Protection of Monk Parakeets Bill (New York State Senate 2011b): *Quaker parakeets are neither harmful to the environment, nor displaced or been a threat to any native species.*

### **4.3 Droppings**

DEFRA has declared the droppings of these birds below their communal nests represent a health hazard. This is unsubstantiated as there is no evidence that the droppings of Quakers are more substantial or more infective than those of any native bird species.

A chemical analysis of monk parakeets' droppings revealed they do no damage to brownstone structures. This is in contrast to pigeon droppings, which do considerable damage. Administrators of Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn view the monk parakeets as beneficial to the site as fewer pigeons nest in areas where monk parakeets nest (About Parakeets.org). Furthermore, there is no evidence that the droppings of monk parakeets pose more of a health hazard than those of any other animal.

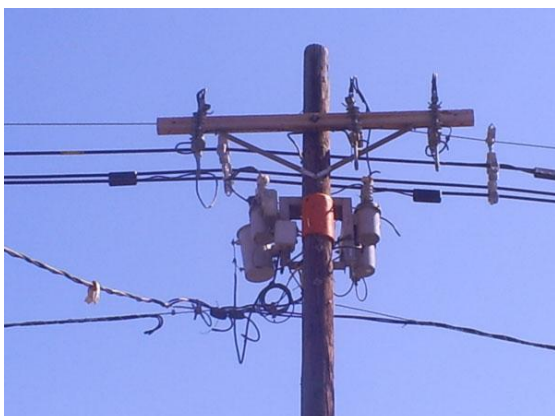
### **4.4 Electricity pylons**

The structure of electricity supply in this country is another angle: "Small town" America cables and transformers to individual homes are above ground on poles. Often streets are festooned with cables to each residence. This might entice the birds to build nests and cause supply problems.

This issue is not so applicable here in the UK because of our electricity supply infrastructure; we don't have many pylons in towns and the distribution network in towns is, in the main, below ground. In the US they have a 110v system which necessitates thicker cables and higher currents (more waste heat) with transformers and cables strewn across the local street scene.

Yes we have pylons in the countryside, but the birds have not managed to colonise successfully outside of towns. Although that does not address the issue of the mobile mast in Southall on which a small colony of monk parakeets built a nest, there have been no other such incidents. Given the very limited spread of colonies, and the fact numbers appear to have been in decline in some areas, we do not see this as an issue.

In Borehamwood we do have telegraph poles for phone lines and the Eruv poles. There have been no nests on any of these structures in the 18 years feral monk parakeets have lived here.



A simple cheap nest deterrent protocol was devised by Alison Evans-Fragale in Edgewater New Jersey USA in cooperation with the local utility company there PSE&G. This utilised orange insulation sleeves ("pole covers") placed over pylon poles (Figure 6) to deter nest building. Monk parakeets have an aversion to the colour orange.

Figure 6

The orange sleeve was applied to 22 poles in the Edgewater area following nest removals and only two showed any signs of nest re-building (Alison Evans-Fragale, presentation to Audubon Society).

Monk parakeets are attracted to the heat given off by the transformers and other equipment high up on the utility poles. Electric owls have been used to successfully scare them away but the batteries need changing regularly. Steve Baldwin, who runs BrooklynParrots.com, a Web site devoted to chronicling the wild urban parakeets, said *the parakeets have strong instincts to return to their original nesting spot. They will not be fooled for too long by a plastic owl, he said. A better solution might be using recorded hawk calls to deter the parakeets, he added, and providing "alternate nest platforms" on poles* (New York Times 2009).

#### **4.5 Agricultural damage**

Although many species of parrot are fruit eaters, the monk parakeet is mainly a grass-seed eater (Gochfeld 2007: Appendix 1). Although they may eat fruit, this is a normal diet for a number of species of birds and unlike starlings, for example, they do not venture many miles into the countryside, preferring to remain in urban areas and forage for food within the nesting range (Butler 2005). The numbers here in the UK are insufficient to cause any substantial loss of crops and are likely to remain small. According to Tayleur (2010) there are no reports of agricultural damage by monk parakeets in the UK and 'there is not enough published research on the UK population to inform management decisions.'

Few studies provide convincing evidence of widespread agricultural damage. No massive agricultural damage as had been predicted thirty years ago in the US (Spreyer and Bucher 1998). Munoz and Real (2006) suggest the crop damage may be mitigated by the fact that initial colonisation is most likely to be in urban and semi-urban areas. They also report that expansion is likely to be limited during the harsh winter months because feeding is essentially limited to seed provided by gardeners (Munoz and Real 2006).

In his letter written to New Jersey Senate Chairman, Dr Gochfeld, a Professor in the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute at Rutgers, New Jersey, wrote: *"I have found no evidence that my earlier concerns about its pest status were warranted. This means little or no evidence of major agricultural damage from its native haunts in Argentina and Brazil, nor its adopted lands in Florida and New Jersey."* He goes on to state *"In New Jersey, it is primarily a bird of cities. It has shown no potential to become an agricultural pest or indeed to spread widely away from urban areas"*. Drawing from his research in Argentina (1970 and 1971) and Puerto Rico (1972) Dr Gochfeld writes: *"In travelling over about 15,000 km of central and northern Argentina, I never found evidence of more than a few birds at widely scattered locations. In my view there is very little evidence that it is really an agricultural pest in Argentina"*, and of

Puerto Rico “*Nothing was ever done to control the bird there, and when I last visited Puerto Rico in the mid-1990s, I found that it was still occurring in small local populations. At that time I favoured eradication of the population there, and at least urged that it be studied and monitored. Experiences over the past 30 years have let me to change my opinion. It has not become an agricultural pest in Puerto Rico, where it is mainly an urban bird in the San Juan area*”. (Gochfield 2007: Appendix 1).

#### **4.6 RSPB support for the eradication of feral monk parakeets in the UK**

DEFRA has funded the RSPB to conduct research with a staggering £5,624,762 since 2001 (DEFRA 2011) so its views are likely to be biased and should not be given credence. The Executive should note that several pages of the hand written petition were signed by members of the RSPB in Hertsmere, including Fellows of the RSPB from the Potters Bar branch.

## **5 We request that:**

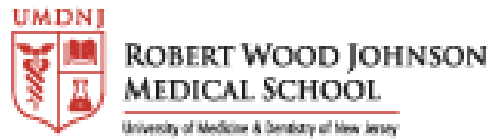
- \* DEFRA should cease-and-desist their eradication activities permanently.
- \* All shooting must stop permanently.
- \* The monk parakeets should be removed from the Natural England General Licence with immediate effect.
- \* The legal status of the Monks Parakeets should be set similar to that adopted by New York incorporating the protections set out in this legislation.
- \* The birds should be monitored but left alone.
- \* Further research needs to be carried out by an independent agency that has no connections with or interests in either DEFRA or its agencies or with the RSPB. The current research is flawed and focussed on other countries, where the climates are generally warmer, not the UK.
- \* Where house owners wish nests to be removed from their properties this must only be done by approved contractors, under veterinary supervision, with prior notice to the Environment Office at the Borough Council and any birds or hatchlings caught must be taken to nearby aviaries such as WRAS in Trent Park Cockfosters.

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## 7 Appendix 1

Gochfeld M. (2007). Letter to New Jersey USA Senate Chairman supporting removal of the Monk Parakeet from the list of “potentially dangerous species, supporting Bill S1768 to achieve this.



TO: SENATOR BOB SMITH, CHAIRMAN

AND THE SENATE ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

FROM: MICHAEL GOCHFELD MD, PHD  
Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute  
170 Frelinghuysen Road  
Piscataway, NJ 08854  
Phone 732-445-0123 x627 FAX 732-445-0130  
E-mail: gochfeld@eohsi.rutgers.edu

DATE: March 21, 2007

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RE: Comments on Senate Bill 1768 which “Removes monk parakeet from list of potentially dangerous species”.

Senator Bob Smith, Chairman: SenBSmith@njleg.org

Senator Stephen M. Sweeney, Vice-Chairman: SenSweeney@njleg.org

Senator Henry P. McNamara: SenMcNamara@njleg.org

Senator John H. Adler: SenAdler@njleg.org

Senator Andrew R. Ciesla: SenCiesla@njleg.org  
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I am Michael Gochfeld, MD, PhD, Professor in the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute, a joint venture of Rutgers University and Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. I specialize in environmental toxicology and also conduct research in avian behavioral ecology, in conjunction with my colleague and wife, Professor Joanna Burger of Rutgers University.

I am writing in support of Senate Bill 1768 to remove the Monk Parakeet, also known as the Quaker Parrot, from the list of potentially dangerous species in New Jersey. This bill also accords protection to feral Monk Parakeets, their nests and eggs. As with any protected species that may, under certain circumstances become a nuisance or threat, special permits may be obtained for specific control purposes, but in general I find that the Monk Parakeet does not pose a threat to the health and welfare

of New Jerseyans. In New Jersey, it is primarily a bird of cities. It has shown no potential to become an agricultural pest, or indeed to spread widely away from urban areas.

I first studied Monk Parakeets in Argentina, in the course of other field studies in 1970 and 1971. There in southern Buenos Aires Province, I found the Monk Parakeet to be uncommon, with scattered nests in tall Eucalyptus trees planted around Estancias (ranches) or on utility poles, even along main highways. As you know, the Monk Parakeet is the only one of the approximately 330 species of parrots, to build its own nest out of sticks. All other parrots nest in holes in trees or poles or nest boxes, or even in dirt banks. Its nests are conspicuous, and they often nest socially. The species ranges from subtropical areas of Brazil to temperate areas of central Argentina. It is able to tolerate cold weather, and this has allowed it to become established and survive the northern winters, as long as it has food and its nest structures are intact.

While in Argentina, I heard that the Monk Parakeet was considered an agricultural pest, although I never heard a first hand account of its damage to crops. And indeed, such damage may have been historic. In traveling over about 15,000 km of central and northern Argentina, I never found evidence of more than a few birds at widely scattered locations. In my view there is very little evidence that it is really an agricultural pest in Argentina.

Nonetheless, in 1972 when I discovered a small colony of Monk Parakeets in Puerto Rico, I issued an alert and published an article in the local Journal of Agriculture, about its pest potential (Gochfeld 1973). Nothing was ever done to control the bird there, and when I last visited Puerto Rico in the mid-1990s, I found that it was still occurring in small local populations. At that time I favored eradication of the population there, and at least urged that it be studied and monitored. Experiences over the past 30 years have let me to change my opinion. It has not become an agricultural pest in Puerto Rico, where it is mainly an urban bird in the San Juan area.

The Monk Parakeets in the United States are mostly derived from intentional and unintentional releases of birds brought into the United States for the pet trade in the 1960s. This trade was substantially curtailed by the Newcastle Disease alert in the early 1970s. Efforts were made to control the Monk Parakeets in the mid-1970s, and many birds were “retrieved” and many nests destroyed. Bird watchers, nature lovers, and citizens in general responded negatively to this campaign, which was largely successful in reducing or eliminating local nesting populations.

With cessation of control effort, the parakeet population has rebounded somewhat, but in New Jersey the birds are still highly local. Although many species of parrots are fruit eaters, the Monk Parakeet is mainly a grass-seed eater. In New Jersey, the birds are largely supported by bird feeding stations. To the extent that they feed in “the wild”, in my experience, they use mainly wild grasses.

In 2000, J. Burger and I, had the opportunity to study Monk Parakeet nests in various habitats in Florida (Burger and Gochfeld 2000). The Parakeet population has been quite stable in the area from West Palm Beach to Miami over the period from about 1990 to 2002. The birds form a few local colonies, and are not widespread. They nest mainly in trees such as Coconut Palm trees and the invasive Melaleuca trees, but also on utility poles. We observed them feeding at bird feeders and on lawns. The average height of nests was about 13 meters. This was determined mainly by the height of the trees, and the trees they nested in were taller than the average trees in the area. This indicates their preference for height.

In 2003 we studied nesting on the Pantanal of central Brazil. Here the birds occurred almost exclusively around human habitation (Burger and Gochfeld 2003). This was in cattle country. The birds were not considered a pest, and some ranch owners put out grain to attract them. Although other species of parrots were feeding on fruiting trees, the Monk Parakeets were feeding on grass seeds. We conducted a matched point study, where each nest site was compared to a randomly selected potential nest site. The actual nests were higher and in taller trees than the random points.

These two studies, as well as earlier observations in Argentina, confirmed that the Monk Parakeet shows a preference for taller nest sites. This led us to suggest a solution to the concerns over possible fire hazards from nests on utility poles, although I am not aware that such fires have actually occurred. We suggested building an extension and platform could be placed on a few poles above the wires, where the Monk Parakeet could build nests that would not be close to the wires. I do not know if this has been attempted.

In the course of studying this interesting bird we have gained respect for its unusual nest construction and the ability of this representative of an almost exclusively tropical family to tolerate northern winters. For a nation that wantonly destroyed its own native parrot, the Carolina Parakeet, the Monk Parakeet offers a cheering spectacle.

I have found no evidence that my earlier concerns about its pest status were warranted. This means little or no evidence of major agricultural damage from its native haunts in Argentina and Brazil, nor its adopted lands in Florida and New Jersey.

I should clarify that I am not in favor of introducing exotic species in general, and I strongly support efforts to reduce populations of invasive species of exotic plants. However, in the case of the Monk Parakeet, which is already here and well-established, I favor a protective attitude. If the need arises for local removal of a nest situated in a hazardous location, this can be accomplished under a permit, as for any normally protected wildlife that poses a threat or nuisance.

Many people consider the Monk Parakeet a welcome part of our urban fauna. Since DEP has an urban wildlife initiative, it should welcome the Monk Parakeet as a success story.

Use of behavioral data on its nest site preference, such as our results in Florida and Brazil, and reports by others, can aid in managing its nesting so that it does not pose a threat.

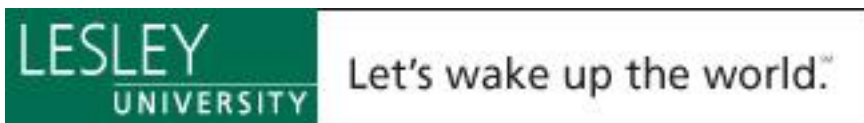
For these reasons I support the removal of the Monk Parakeet from the list of “potentially dangerous species” and, therefore, ask for your support of Bill S1768.

## REFERENCES

- Gochfeld M. 1973. Ecologic aspects of ectopic populations of Monk Parakeets (*Myopsitta monachus*) and possible agricultural consequences. *J. Agriculture Univ Puerto Rico* 57:262-270.
- Burger J, Gochfeld M. 2000. Nest site selection in Monk Parakeets (*Myopsitta monachus*) in Florida. *Bird Behavior* 13:99-105.
- Burger J, Gochfeld M. 2003. Nesting behavior and nest site selection in Monk Parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*) in the Pantanal of Brazil. *Acta Ethologica* 15:23-34.

## 8 Appendix 2

Morimoto D.C (2007) Lesley University Cambridge MA, USA, March 20



Natural Sciences and Mathematics Division  
Lesley College  
29 Everett Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

20 March 2007

Dear Governor Corzine:

I am writing to request your support of Bill #S1768, which asks the Senate Environmental Committee to remove Monk Parakeets from the list of "potentially dangerous species".

My protest of the classification of these creatures as "potentially dangerous" arises from my general ecological knowledge (I am a professional ecologist) and my detailed knowledge of invasive species, as well as from balanced ethical considerations.

In the 1970's, when feral Monk populations became apparent in the United States, lawmakers became concerned that these populations would pose an agricultural threat, and a threat to other birds, so the parrots were placed on the list of "potentially dangerous species" for the purpose of monitoring their effects on crops and indigenous bird species. 30 years later, we now know that the wild Monks are neither agricultural pests nor menaces to indigenous wildlife populations.

Although the Monk Parakeet may be classified as an invasive species in warmer climates like Florida, this classification cannot be extrapolated at this time to the Monk parakeets of New England or northern climates in general. Populations in northern geographic regions like New England and Chicago suffer from high annual winter mortality (death) rates due to severe winter weather. Thus, while their numbers may increase significantly during the breeding season, they usually decline to a more or less stable baseline population number due to extreme winter mortality.

Population studies in Chicago report typical yearly figures that illustrate the point: In April 1992, Hyman and Pruett-Jones counted 64 birds and a total of 26 nests on power poles and one antenna tower in Hyde Park, a suburb west of Chicago. After the nestlings fledged in July, they counted a total of 143 birds, but after the winter of 1992-3, they counted only 95 birds in the same area (Hyman and Pruett-Jones 1995). The following websites provides more information on this species <http://invasions.bio.utk.edu/invaders/monk.html>, <http://www.brooklynparrots.com/>.

Given this information, Monk Parakeets cannot be unambiguously classified as an invasive species in the northern reaches of their distribution at this time. Enough interest in these birds exists to allow detailed monitoring that would prevent any transition to 'invasiveness'. In the meantime, curtailing human activities like providing too much habitat and bird food for exotic species would be much more effective than removing birds for a reason that has not been scientifically validated. That the birds raise peoples' awareness, interest people in nature, increase local species diversity (we have caused the extinction of 2 parrots in the US, after all) and likely have little effect on native species, all add to the support for their cautious protection.

I ask that you please re-examine the classification of the Monk Parakeets in light of what is now known about them 30 years after they were placed on the list of "potentially dangerous species".

Thank you very much for your consideration, and I hope you will support Bill #S1768.

Please contact me if I can be of further assistance.

Sincerely,

David C. Morimoto, PhD, Program Director, Natural Science and Mathematics

Lesley University