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'Chicago Parakeet Project' Seeks Help Tracking Green Invaders

Monk parakeets -- you may have seen them or, more likely, heard their raucous squawking in or around Chicago, a place far from their native habitat in South America. Whole colonies have descended from a few pets that escaped or were freed by their owners, as the garrulous green birds have adapted to Chicago's temperate climate and spread beyond initial feral nesting sites in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood to more than 500 known locations.

Because information about Chicago's monk parakeets is anecdotal, a trio of Chicago university biology professors, curious to learn more, is enlisting the public's help in the "Chicago Parakeet Project."

"We're trying to find the location of every nest in the city and surrounding areas so we can learn more about habitat preferences, why they chose to nest in certain places, and also to understand the pattern of where they spread and predict where they may be going," said Emily Minor, assistant professor of biological sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Minor, along with colleagues Stephen Pruett-Jones of the University of Chicago and Christopher Appelt of St. Xavier University, have developed an easy-to-use online survey for the public to report parakeet sites. The site is www.uic.edu/labs/minor/chicago-parakeet.html

"All we really need is an address or cross-street location of the nests," said Minor. "We plan to visit each nest and collect data that may be hard for the public to collect."

Minor, a landscape ecologist and mapping expert who is interested in large spatial patterns and the spread of invading species, joined Pruett-Jones and Appelt after learning of their work.

Together, the group hopes to study the spatial dispersion of nests and the long-term changes in the population. Other possible research areas include the effects of this exotic bird species on native bird communities.

Minor says the birds have been tracked as far as 20 miles from the original Hyde Park sites where they were first noticed in the 1960s. Their nests are high up in trees and in structures such as power-line towers and poles, where large nests have been known to catch fire. Nests can be communal, like an apartment complex for birds.

"A nest can be many feet tall and wide," said Minor. "They're often high up."

But it's the birds' sound that may catch your attention first, Minor said. "Like a normal parrot, they're pretty loud."

The parakeets survive Chicago winters if they can find warm nesting spots and bird-feeders. The birds have a diverse diet, which helps survival. While sometimes considered an agricultural pest in their native Argentina, monk parakeets have not yet been found raiding cropland beyond the Chicago metropolitan area.

Released or escaped monk parakeets have thrived in other large cities in temperate climate zones, but research on how this invasive species has spread is scant. The Chicago parakeet project may yield clues about why this

subtropical pet shop bird has taken a shine to the big city lights up north.

"I think this is a really cool project and rare opportunity to see a species invasion in progress," Minor said. "You don't get to see this often. You usually see it after it happens, not while it's happening."

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