

Parrots and Parakeets in Florida¹

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Description

Parrots and parakeets are popular household pets because of their colorful plumage, easy care, and remarkable personalities. But, within the last few decades, experienced as well as backyard bird watchers have noticed parrots and parakeets flying free in South Florida's cities and suburbs. These gregarious birds are easily recognized in the wild by their raucous calls, large heads and extremely heavy bills. Their flight is swift with rapid, shallow wing beats and virtually all have a certain amount of green in their plumage. Parakeets are distinguished from parrots by their smaller size and long pointed tails. The gaudily colored, long-tailed Macaw is the largest of the species. They can reach a length of over 3 feet (1 meter).

Range and Habitat

Parrots are found throughout the tropical regions of the world. Their range is from the Southern Hemisphere to the tropical and subtropical parts of the Northern Hemisphere. Southern Asia, Africa and South and Central America all have native populations of parrots. The Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) was the only parrot native

to Florida and is now extinct. None of the parrots occurring in Florida today are native. They have been accidentally introduced as a result of the pet trade.

Parrots in South Florida

Parrots and parakeets are not migratory, so, in almost every case, the species that occur in Florida are those that have been imported for the pet trade. Many of the world's tropical countries allowed commercialization of their birds and in the 1960's and 1970's, the Miami area became a major importation center. Many exotic birds escaped in great numbers at the point of entry, while others escaped in smaller numbers from pet shops or from their owners. Over 20 species of parrots have been observed in South Florida. Large populations of rose-ringed parakeets, monk parakeets, canary-winged parakeets and budgerigars have become established. These and other members of the parrot family, Psittacidae, are rapidly establishing breeding populations in South Florida.

Normally, plants and animals do not do well when introduced to a new environment, but some species of the parrot family have been extremely successful and have continued to expand their

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numbers in the wild. Their success can be partially attributed to Florida's mild climate and changing landscape. Subtropical Florida now contains many elements of the world's tropics.

In South Florida's urban areas native plants have been largely replaced by exotic vegetation. Instead of native shade trees, such as gumbo limbo or live oak, exotic fig trees and Australian pines line city streets. Non-native plants from the tropics, popular for their showy flowers or edible fruit can be found in virtually every backyard. With the introduction of non-native plants from the tropics, the ecological stage was set for the establishment of parrots and parakeets. Various kinds of parrots and parakeets have successfully adapted to urban areas. Many have no problem finding the same kinds of plants they once roosted in or fed upon in their native countries. Also, there are a few competitive factors, such as predators, diseases or parasites, to limit their reproduction or life spans.

Behavior and Reproduction

Parrots and parakeets belong to the order Psittaciformes. Nearly all species dwell in trees and they feed on fruits, nuts and other vegetable matter. Their varied diet contributes to their success in southern Florida. If one component of their diet is not readily available, they will easily substitute another for it. Their toe arrangement (two toes face forward and two face the rear), allows them to manipulate their food with their feet. Parrots are agile climbers and will use their heavy beaks and clasping toes to move from branch to branch in search of food. Because these brightly colored birds are so popular as pets, backyard bird watchers are delighted when they are visited by them and contribute to their success by feeding and protecting them.

Captive parrots are famous for their mimicry, but, parrots in the wild seem to make little or no use of their vocal abilities beyond uttering typical calls and cries to co-ordinate flock behavior. Parrots are gregarious and they usually will roost and feed together in a flock. This flocking behavior gives them additional protection from predators and offers them a larger number of potential mates. Without the instinct to flock, caged birds which are released will eventually die off before they can reproduce.

Parrots and parakeets roost or feed together in pairs or flocks. They nest in unlined holes in trees, termite nests, rocks, or banks. Several Australian species nest on the ground and the Monk parakeet builds colonial nests of twigs in the branches of trees or on power line transformers. Each pair of parakeets has its own private compartment, but the entire flock seems to be on intimate terms. The nest is used as sleeping quarters all year round and is added to from year to year until at times it breaks the supporting branches or lines.

Problems

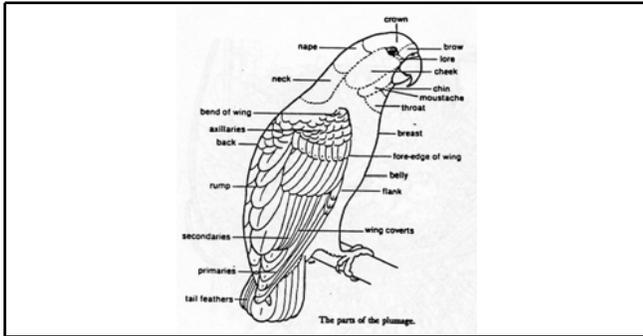
There are concerns that agricultural areas and remaining areas of natural ecological communities may suffer harmful effects. Some of the more common species are considered agricultural pests in their native countries. The rose-ringed parakeet is considered to be one of the most destructive agricultural pests in India. Monk parakeets are serious agricultural pests in Argentina and have damaged power lines with the weight of their huge colonial nests. Why more problems have not been reported in South Florida fruit groves is not known. If larger populations develop, however, parrots could become a threat to Florida's crops.

The natural ecological communities in South Florida are vulnerable to non-native invasion. Exotic parrots and parakeets might out-compete native bird populations for food and space. A common characteristic of successful non-native invaders is that they are more aggressive than their native counterparts. For example, many parrots and parakeets build their nests in the cavities of dead trees. Tree cavities are limited in number in suburban areas. Increasing populations of psittacids may harm native hole nesting birds when they are pushed out to make room for non-natives.

Parrot Identification Checklist

Macaws (*Ara*)

- Military Macaw (*A. militaris*). This native to Mexico, Central America, and northern South America is 25.5 inches (65 cm) long and has grass-green plumage with red brow and rump. Uppertail coverts are blue and underside is olive



Parrot plumage. Credits: Reprinted from "The Parrot Family, 1984, Arco Publishing, Inc.

green. Cheeks have four rows of small red feathers and the beak is black.

- Chestnut-fronted Macaw (*A. severa*). Native to South America. Only 19 inches (48 cm) long, it is only half the size of its largest cousins. Has green plumage with reddish brown brow band and red and blue wing markings. Cheeks and tail are chestnut colored. Numerous nest sites have been documented in the Miami area.

Cockatiels (*Nymphicus*)

- Cockatiel (*N. hollandicus*). This is a common bird in Australia. In its native land it lives on the open savannah and grasslands and feeds on grass seeds and agricultural crops. The adult reaches 13 inches (33 cm) in length. The male is slate grey and has a yellow head with an orange ear patch. The secondaries are white and the undertail coverts are black. The females have a grey and yellow head and the orange ear patch is duller.

Amazon parrots (*Amazona*)

- Red-crowned parrot (*A. viridigenalis*). This native of northeastern Mexico is 17 inches (43 cm) in length. Also commonly called the Green-cheeked Amazon. It has green plumage and a bright red crown. Back feathers have black edging and a blue band extends up the side of the head behind both eyes. Blue tips on primary wings and red wing coverts. Fairly common in urban areas of South Florida. Nests and feeds in Australian Pines and other non-native trees.

- Yellow-headed parrot (*A. ohrocephala*). Known as the "talking" parrot. This bird is native to central and northern South America. It has green

plumage with a yellow head and red wing patch and is 15 to 17 inches (39 to 43 cm) in length. The female is smaller with a shorter, broader beak. Have established colonies in South Florida. They are frequently seen with Red-crowned parrots.

- White-fronted parrot (*A. albinfrons*). This native of Central America is 10.25 inches (27 cm) in length and has green plumage with a white crown. It is also known as the spectacled Amazon because of the broad red circles around the eyes. They have bred in the Miami area.

- Orange-winged parrot (*A. amazonica*). A South American native measuring 13 inches (33 cm) long. Has dark green plumage with orange wing markings and yellow on the throat and cheeks. Eyebrow stripe, forehead and lores are blue.

- Red-lored parrot (*A. autumnalis*). A native of Central and northern South America. It is 13.75 inches (35 cm), it has green plumage with blackish edging along nape feathers. Brow and lores are red and crown is blue. It has a yellowish coloration under the eyes and the smaller primaries are tinted red. Not as common in South Florida as the red-crowned parrot or white-crowned parrot.

- Mealy Amazon (*A. farinosa farinosa*). Native to southern Mexico and northern South America. Green plumage is sprinkled with grey on the back. Crown is orange and wing coverts are red with narrow red border to wings. White encircles eye. Observed nesting in the Miami area.

Parakeets (6 genera)

- Black-hooded parakeet (*Nandayus nenday*) Also called Nanday conure. Native to South America from Brazil to Argentina. Habitats are savannahs, forest regions, palm groves and agricultural land. Has bright green plumage with a black head and beak, bluish throat and breast, and red thighs. This bird is 12.25 inches (31 cm) long. The female is smaller and her beak is more curved. In native areas these birds often assemble in huge flocks to exploit corn fields. Breeds in the Miami area.

- Monk parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) Native to Argentina. These birds have formed colonies in

suburban areas on both coasts of South Florida. Several thousand breeding pairs are now established. Length is approximately 11.5 inches (29 cm). Plumage is grey-green and brow, front of head, cheeks, throat and upper breast grey with dark wavy shading. Secondary wing feathers are blue. Monk parakeet's nesting habits are different from most other parrots. They will construct huge colonial nests made of twigs with separate chambers for each breeding pair. They live in their nests all year round and continue to add to it over the years. They nests can become so heavy they can break tree branches or power lines.

- Hispaniolan parakeet (*Aratinga chloroptera*) Native to Hispaniola, its plumage is green with yellowish underparts and with a red patch under the bend of the wing. Pairs have been observed in Miami with flocks of Canary-winged parakeets.

- Rose-ringed parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) This species is native to west Africa, Sudan, northern Ethiopia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Burma and south-east China. It has established a viable population in suburban Dade County. Adults are 16.5 inches (42 cm) long. They male has green plumage, a neckband that begins as black at the throat and turns pink at the nape and a black stripe from the nostrils to the eyes. The beak may be red or black and red. The female has no neckband or eye stripe.

- Canary-winged parakeet (*Brotogeris versicolorus*) Native to Bolivia, Brazil and Paraguay, the species has become fairly common in south Florida's urban areas. They nest in non-native palms and feed on tropical fruits, especially mangos. Adults are 8.25 inches (21 cm) long and are green with a large yellow patch on the secondaries.

- Orange-fronted parakeet (*Aratinga canicularis*) Native to the west coast of Central America. Plumage is green with an olive breast, blue wing feathers, and orange and blue on crown. Believed to be breeding in Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

- Red-masked conure (*Aratinga erthrogenys*) Native to the west coast of Equador and Peru, this species has attempted breeding in the Miami area. Its plumage is green with yellowish underparts and red on the head and wings.

- Green parakeet (*Aratinga holochlora*) A native of Central America, individuals are now seen in the Miami area and Sanibel Island. Plumage is green with a yellowish wash on the breast and red flecks on the neck.

- Budgerigier (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) This tiny bird is commonly called a parakeet or canary. It is native to the Australian interior. The wild budgerigier is green with a yellow head and wavy black and yellow pattern to the black feathers but mutations are common in pet birds. Escapees have formed colonies in localized urban areas along the Gulf Coast from Crystal River to Ft. Myers and in Ft. Lauderdale.

Suggested Readings

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