

Here's why the state should let Quaker parrots stay

By Dr. George Messenger / Concord Monitor

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In the past few weeks there have been several newspaper articles telling us that it is illegal to own a Quaker parrot in New Hampshire, and that this has been the case since 1998. It all came to a head when a woman in Nashua was ordered to get rid of her birds within 30 days or they would be seized and possibly destroyed. It took me a couple of weeks to focus on this, but once I realized what was going on, I felt the need to do something about it. I am a little passionate about birds - especially psittacines(parrots); I have been studying and treating them for close to 30 years.

It was a shock to hear about this rule. I used to think it was funny that these unique birds were illegal in other states, in particular Massachusetts, yet they were safe here in our state. And I'm not the only one who was surprised - nobody knew about this rule. I did a little research and made a few phone calls in order to formulate a more evidence-based opinion on a rather complex subject. I can't say that I have all the facts or even that all my facts are completely accurate, but due to the urgency of this situation, I felt I had to put out this article now. This is one of those "time out" moments during which we should all sit down and figure this thing out instead of acting rashly. My bottom line opinion is that this administrative rule is a bad one, and we need to change it. In the meantime, nobody's birds should be euthanized. I hope to convince you and the New Hampshire lawmakers to agree with this.

You can easily go back and review the recent articles - about this woman in Nashua and her birds and about the New Hampshire Fish and Game's ultimatum and the rule that allows them to give that ultimatum. You will discover that nobody, including the state Department of Agriculture, knew about this rule, and that Quaker parrots have been sold (and probably still are) in this state during these years when they were supposed to be outlawed. Instead of reviewing all of this, I'd like to focus a bit more on the rule and the birds included in it.

Quaker parrots (*Myiopsitta monachus*) - also much less frequently referred to as Monk parakeets - are a rather interesting type of bird. They are from the southern regions of South America, including Argentina, Uruguay and eastern Brazil. They are an

opportunistic species whose range has grown with the expansion of agriculture; their habitat is mostly sub-tropical, bordering occasionally on temperate. In Argentina, they are considered pests - they eat some of the corn crop and are not very popular with farmers; this is a bit of a serious problem. They are loud, very social, highly intelligent birds with an extensive vocabulary with dialects; they make very large colony-type stick nests in which 10 to 20 pairs of birds will lay their eggs and raise their young. These nests are used year after year by many generations.

In captivity, they make very interesting pets. They are fairly small compared to other parrots - basically about a quarter pound of feathers and flesh with a beak - a little bigger than a cockatiel. I have always found them to be annoyingly amusing. they usually seem to be trying to get away with something.

I remember one bird that I used to examine regularly - this bird would cling to the side of his cage, and when I would walk by he would shoot his feces at me and then laugh! Even though he did get me once, I had to laugh back.

Quakers are not necessarily my favorite parrots - probably because they are so naughty - but they sure are loveable and make excellent pets. There are a lot of people who own them and cherish them; including quite a few people in New Hampshire.

Before 1992, these birds, as well as most other species of parrot, were captured in the wild and imported into the United States in substantial numbers. Beginning in the late 1960s, there were large shipments of Quakers from South America to the United States, as well as from state to state. By the 1970s there were feral populations of these birds in several locations around the country - Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Texas and Florida included. It is likely that these flocks were the result of birds escaping from some shipments - some cases of this are documented. Also, there was probably some deliberate release of birds by owners who became tired of them.

These flocks have not only managed to survive, but, especially in the warmer states, have thrived. There are more than 100,000 of them in Florida. They do cause some problems - they make their large nests on utility poles, transformers, satellite dishes and similar structures, which is a fire and structural hazard; they cause power outages; they

could be involved in the spread of Newcastle's disease; they compete with native wildlife for food; and they do cause some significant crop damage.

There are small numbers of them in Chicago and a few other more northern cities - they tend to frequent birdfeeder visitors in these urban areas. There are just a few of them in Massachusetts, and there have been no reports of sightings in New Hampshire - ever.

In colder climates, such as Connecticut, the only way the birds can survive the winters is by living in the protection of their apartment-style nests.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service launched a campaign in the 1970s to eradicate these birds due to their potential as an agricultural pest. Eventually they gave up - probably for multiple reasons: it was too difficult and expensive and there was much public outcry.

Also, in many areas, these birds have not proven to be a worsening threat. Various states gradually adopted their own laws in an attempt to prevent the birds' multiplication. Massachusetts was one of them. In recent years, the ban on their ownership in Massachusetts has been lifted, since they have not proven to be a threat there. It is still illegal to own them in several states; New Hampshire is one of them.

Since 1992, the importation of birds into the United States has been banned. Essentially all of the pet Quakers sold in the United States are born and raised here by breeders. People buy these birds to keep them as pets; the last thing on their minds is releasing them into the wild. Occasionally a pet bird will escape - this is relatively easy for birds, since they can fly, (sometimes even if their wings are clipped) and often they are uncaged.

This happens with all kinds of pet birds; Quakers are no exception.

However, these tame pet birds will eventually want to make it back to their human caretakers as opposed to trying to make it on their own (this is different from the original wild-caught birds that escaped and established the initial colonies). A bird that escapes in New Hampshire is likely to die of frostbite unless it had a nest to live in (which would have been made by a number of them). This is extremely unlikely. I treated a Quaker a few years ago that had flown outside in the winter and had been out for a few days; it eventually died from frostbite complications.

The most exciting part of my research was my phone call to Robert Ridgely, a doctor of ornithology who lives in New Hampshire. Ridgely is a well respected authority on South American birds; he has written several books, including *The Birds of Panama*, *The Birds of Ecuador* and two volumes of *The Birds of South America*. He is currently involved in many conservation projects in several countries and is a frequent traveler to many countries in South America. He is very familiar with Quakers.

We talked about this curious bird, and he confirmed my suspicions that that the chance of Quakers establishing any colonies in New Hampshire were slim to none.

The current rule bans ownership of certain species in New Hampshire - creatures like zebra mussels, nonindigenous crayfish, a couple species of carp, etc. This all is well and good, but at the very end of this rule, there are two words - Monk parakeet. It makes sense to attempt to keep these birds under control where they are a problem, but since they really aren't a problem here, nor are they likely to ever become one (as has proved to be the case in Massachusetts), the current rule should be changed.

There is going to be a hearing on this ruling in a couple weeks; I plan to attend and plead the case for Quakers.