

## **NH Fish and Game says Nashua woman's parrots are illegal**

By DAVID BROOKS / Staff Writer /Nashua Telegraph

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For 23 years, it has been illegal in New Hampshire to own a small, chatty bird known as the Quaker parrot because of concerns that they'll establish themselves in the wild. And yet for all that time, these same birds have been sold openly in stores that are regularly inspected by the state.

That ironic situation came about because one New Hampshire government agency apparently didn't know about a rule imposed by another government agency. But it may well change now that a Nashua woman who owns more than a dozen of the birds has been told to get rid of them.

"I don't want to give them up. We're going to try to change the Fish and Game rule," said Suzanne Burke, who has bred and raised Quaker parrots for years in her White Plains Drive home.

These small parrots, which are also known as monk parrots or parakeets, have long been popular with owners because of their intelligence and personality. They often sell for around \$250.

Publicity about Burke's situation has raised questions about why Quaker parrots are on Fish and Game's list of prohibited species, which is also populated by such famous unpleasant creatures as snakehead fish and zebra mussels.

Although they can thrive as far north as Connecticut and Chicago, where they've become a well-established nuisance, Massachusetts dropped its ban years ago because breeding populations didn't seem to be moving north.

These questions are likely to come up at Monday's meeting of the Fish and Game Commission, which sets rules for the department, including the list of prohibited species. Questions may also be raised about why the state ban is so little known.

"As far as everybody in our club was concerned, the last law that any of us had been aware of, they were legal. Nobody had ever heard anything different," said Dave Smith, a member of the board of directors of the state bird-owners club Birds of a Feather.

Fish and Game rules, which are set by a commission appointed by the governor, has a list of "species or groups of wildlife shall be designated as prohibited," meaning they can't be brought into the state, sold or even owned.

The only bird species is "Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*)," which is the name that biologists commonly use for Quaker parrots.

#### **Pet stores OK'd**

Particularly galling to Burke and others is that state inspectors have been approving licenses for pet stores that sell Quaker parrots.

"We've had the inspector come in here and do inspections, and say how cute they are," said Alan Fox, owner of Bird Supply of New Hampshire in Nashua, which has sold Quaker parrots for six years.

Pet stores are inspected by three inspectors for the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture's Division of Animal Industry. They also do such things as livestock testing.

Cindy Heisler, program assistant for the division, said the licensing is concerned with "the care and keeping of the animals," not whether the animals are allowed on Fish and Game rules.

"We expect the licensees to know what they are supposed to have, and not," Heisler said.

Heisler said that if an inspector spotted an obviously illegal pet, “We would let Fish and Game know,” but that their inspectors may not realize the difference among various species of parrots.

### **An invasive species**

Quaker parrots – the name comes from the bird’s habit of shaking or quaking when excited, said John Davey, president of the national Quaker Parakeet Society – have been prohibited in New Hampshire since 1998.

It isn’t clear exactly why they were placed on the banned list, but one possibility is presented by Tom French, assistant director of the division of Fisheries and Wildlife in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts outlawed the species at around the same time, he said, because the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was considering banning them altogether because they had escaped from stores or owners and established large breeding populations in various parts of the country. The federal government never went through with a ban, but a number of states did.

Quaker parrots come from relatively temperate climates in Argentina and Uruguay, which is why they’ve been able to survive in cold places in the U.S.

The birds tend to congregate in cities or suburban areas. They have a bad habit of building their large, communal nests – which can hold 20 families and be 10 feet wide or even wider – on utility poles, where they’ve been known to harm transformers or cause fires from crossed power lines.

In Connecticut in 2005, for example, this problem led the government and local utility to kill a number of parrot populations, resulting in considerable controversy. Just breaking up the nests doesn’t work, biologists say, because the individual birds will spread out and build new nests, spreading the problem.

French says Massachusetts dropped its ban a decade ago because it seemed that Quaker parrots' northward march had stalled. Three pairs are living in eastern Massachusetts, but none have laid eggs, he said.

"It's virtually impossible for birds to colonize in New Hampshire," argued Fox, of Bird Supply of New Hampshire. "If we thought we had something that would cause a problem, we wouldn't keep them."

However, biologist John Kanter, the non-game and endangered wildlife coordinator for New Hampshire Fish and Game, isn't so sure.

He points to Chicago, which for years has had wild breeding pairs of the birds. So many of their nests exist in the Windy City, in fact, that researchers from three universities have a long-running project to map them.

"It seems like it's reasonable, or prudent, to take that kind of step ... to keep them from becoming a problem here," Kanter said.

Fights between pet owners and government regulators over species aren't uncommon, and not limited to birds. The federal government is in the midst of a big battle over attempts to eliminate ownership of a number of reptiles and amphibians, even in northern climates.

### **Connecticut problem**

In Connecticut, Quaker parrots have become a regular nuisance along the coast, said Jenny Dickson, wildlife biologist for that state's wildlife division.

"The population is still here, still extremely abundant and continuing to grow. They are doing very, very well in our climate," Dickson said. "We are seeing an increase in complaints not just from utility companies ... but from municipalities about them nesting on lights on athletic fields, those kind of issues."

She said the populations are largely limited to urban and suburban areas, where they also produce complaints about noise and messiness.

“People tend to like them a lot better if they’re nesting in somebody else’s yard,” Dickson said.

That state is keeping a wary eye on the birds as they move east, and to a lesser extent move north, out of concern that they may cause damage to orchards and vineyards. So far, no problems have been reported.

### **Nashua situation**

In Nashua, Burke has raised Quaker parrots as personal pets and as a “hobby breeder” for many years, keeping them in the basement.

The current situation started a couple weeks ago when she heard rumors that Quaker parrots were illegal in the state.

She called the law enforcement offices of New Hampshire Fish and Game and was told that yes, the species is on the department’s list of species that can’t be brought into the state or owned here.

After the call, which alerted the department to the existence of illegal birds, it had to follow up, said Lt. Robert Bryant of New Hampshire Fish and Game.

“We do enforce it, and are enforcing it as we’re made aware of violations,” he said. “Everybody’s well aware what can happen when you have an invasive species that establishes itself. ... Whether you’re talking about plants or wildlife, you’re trying to protect your native wildlife species.”

A Fish and Game officer visited Burke on Sunday, Jan. 30, and told her to get rid of the birds within 30 days or they could be taken by the state.

“We sent an officer down to, in person, make sure that she understood the situation,” Bryant said.

He noted that under state law, Burke could have been fined up to \$1,000 per bird, although no charges have been placed.

Burke said she's certain that if the state takes the birds, they'll be killed because of lack of alternatives.

She called friends and newspapers to alert them to the situation. Since then, a number of people and groups have become interested, including state Rep. Jeanine Notter, of Merrimack, a bird fan.

"No one knew about this law, and I don't think there's a single case of anyone being singled out for having these birds ever before," Burke said. "I'm going to fight this. ... I'm going to keep my birds."

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<http://www.nashuatelegraph.com/news/907967-196/nh-fish-and-game-says-nashua-womans.html>