

TO CHAIRMAN Douglas Fisher  
Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee

FROM MICHAEL GOCHFELD MD, PHD March 8, 2006

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Comments on Assembly Bill 1237 which  
"Removes monk parakeet from list of potentially dangerous species."

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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 Assembly Bill 1237 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”.

## REFERENCES

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