

Historical Perspectives

Feral Parrots in the Continental United States and United Kingdom: Past, Present, and Future

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Introduction

In many cities across the United States (USA), from Boston to Los Angeles and Seattle to Miami, free-flying parrots and parakeets can now be seen. Likewise, feral parakeets are now present in England in the Greater London area, on the Isle of Thanet in Kent, and in select cities along the south coast. In some areas, these feral parrots have been present for decades, whereas in others, parrots have only been present for a few years. This paper summarizes the historical changes in number and composition of psittacine birds in the USA and United Kingdom (UK).

Native parrot species

The USA was formerly home to 2 native parrot species—the Carolina parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) and the thick-billed parrot (*Rhynchopsitta pachyrhyncha*)—both of which disappeared from the USA during the 20th century.

Carolina parakeets were formerly found throughout the southeastern USA, north to New York and west to North Dakota, Colorado, and Texas.^{1,2} Carolina parakeets fed on a variety of fruits, buds, and seeds and were not averse to sampling crops, a fact that did not endear them to farmers.² In addition, flocks tended not to flee when fired upon, particularly if an individual in the flock called in distress.² Consequently, hunting or persecution probably had a substantial impact on the population. Individuals also were collected for the pet trade, which may have hastened their decline.² By the mid-19th century, Carolina parakeets were scarce throughout much of their range and were considered to be abundant only in Florida.²

By the early 20th century, Carolina parakeets were nearly extinct, but reliable sightings were reported

from Florida in 1904 and Missouri in 1905. A specimen also was taken in Kansas in 1904.¹ The last known Carolina parakeets were kept at the Cincinnati Zoo (where they had been kept for 32 years), with “Lady Jane” dying during the summer of 1917 and her mate “Incas” on February 21, 1918,¹ although unconfirmed sightings of Carolina parakeets were reported in South Carolina until 1936,¹ and at least 1 author suggests that they may have survived until the late 1930s in Florida.² Thereafter, there have been no credible reports of this species, and it is believed to be extinct. The disappearance of the Carolina parakeet is presumed to be due to a combination of overhunting, habitat destruction, and disease.²

Thick-billed parrots were formerly present in southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, extending south through the Sierra Madre Occidental of Mexico to northwestern Durango.^{1,3} Unlike the Carolina parakeet, the thick-billed parrot fed primarily on pine seeds, although it also ate acorns.⁴ Heavy hunting pressure is blamed for the decline of this species in the USA by the end of the 19th century. During the early 20th century, thick-billed parrots were still present in reasonable numbers in southern Arizona and New Mexico. However, hunting pressure on these birds continued to be intense.⁴ Of 300 parrots seen in Pinery Canyon, Arizona, during 1917–18, fully one third were shot.⁴

By the 1930s, the population(s) of thick-billed parrots in the USA had declined considerably. The last credible sighting of thick-billed parrots in Arizona was in 1938 at the Chiricahua National Monument.⁴ A number of other species vanished from the Chiricahua region of southeastern Arizona at approximately the same time, including elk (*Cervus elaphus*), pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*), and wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*).⁴ The last reliable sighting of thick-billed parrots in New Mexico was in 1964.⁴

A program to reestablish thick-billed parrots in the USA began in 1986. A total of 88 individuals (most

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