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What These Immigrant Parakeets of Brooklyn Can Teach Us About City Life



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Among the delights of time spent with urban wildlife is the reminder to be quiet and patient—not an easy task for a New Yorker.

This is Sidewalk Naturalist, a new monthly column by Lenora Todaro which offers a portrait of New York City through its wildlife citizens, whose lives tell us something about the way we live in the fragile ecosystem that is the city today.

In the 1960s, so one story goes, a crate from Argentina unloaded from a cargo plane at Kennedy Airport was opened by a mob underling—and out flew a flock of green monk parakeets. The Argentinian government had implored farmers there to kill what it saw as agricultural pests, and to send in the dead birds' feet as proof of their demise. When that program failed, the parakeets—more than sixty thousand of them—were rounded up and sent to America to sell in pet stores as exotic fauna. The flock in the box at JFK got free.

A rather juicier origin story tells of divorce revenge: When a court awarded a New York couple's pet store to the husband, the ex-wife took her key, opened the store and released the parakeets, whose value had been calculated in their beauty, intelligence and ability to mimic the human voice.



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Whatever their origin, the monk parakeets and their descendants settled in outer-borough New York, more than 500 of them fashioning as many as two hundred nests. So it is that at Green-Wood Cemetery, 478 acres of glacier-carved hills, lakes, and grandiose tombstones tucked in between Park Slope and Sunset Park, the final resting place of Boss Tweed, Leonard Bernstein, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, a brood of monk parakeets have built themselves a hermitage among the dead.

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When I was a child growing up in the Bronx, a treasured copy of Roger Tory Peterson's 1947 edition of *A Field Guide to the Birds: Eastern Land and Waterbirds* accompanied me into parks and woods. I took notes on what I spotted: sparrows (drab), pigeons (aggressive), red-breasted robins (sweet), and blue jays (thieves, but beautiful). Peterson's book helped me

think in specifics (black or white tipped wings?) and actions (above the water, ready for the plunge). And, as an only child, I admit to hankering for an African grey parrot to chat with. In Pennsylvania, where I sometimes went in the summer, I fell for black-capped chickadees, tufted titmouse, scarlet tanagers, American goldfinch, and the knocking sounds of busy downy woodpeckers. Along with birds, there were bears, salamanders, and trout to discover. I built houses of twigs and moss for chipmunks. At home, I'd follow raccoons and squirrels, so although I did not become a birder, I did fall for wildlife in all its iterations.



Peterson's book is on my mind when I reach Green-Wood one chilly December morning in 2018. My Aunt Caroline is buried in the cemetery, and I'll visit the grave, but I'm there also to see monk parakeets. Steve Baldwin, parrot aficionado and a volunteer leader of monthly bird safaris since 2005, will be my guide, and he's perturbed when I arrive: He hasn't spotted the parakeets lately. "It's not like there's some plague wiping them out," he tells me, "but I'm a typical neurotic Roz Chast New Yorker, always asking 'what are they taking away now?'" By 'they,' I infer, he means the uncaring society that promotes fossil fuels, grows plastic bag islands, and heats the Earth into a primordial stew with no regard for the disappearance of species—human and animal alike.

The monk parakeets' nest winds in and out of the spires of Green-Wood's Gothic Revival entrance gate, at the intersection of 25th Street and Fifth Avenue. At first, it seems like twigs blew into the gate and got tangled up and stuck like knots in uncombed hair. Looking through binoculars it begins to look more organized. Twelve to fifteen birds live there, and the nest is a sculptural masterpiece of twig weaving, with numerous openings for different bird families—two-room abodes with birthing and communal areas. Parakeets build and repair compulsively; pairs of parakeets mate for life and raise their young cooperatively with other birds in their nest compound. But on this morning, there is only silence. Baldwin suggests that the parakeets are off foraging for berries.



There is a loud buzzing noise. “Whoa!” says Steve, and points to a demonic-looking drone. “This is the biggest threat to wildlife. Maybe that’s why the parrots are staying away.”

As it turns out, the drone is being flown by a scientist who is surveying the cemetery’s grass, which, he says, is a patchwork of grasses, many invasive, that mourners bring to bury with their loved ones. His project is to photograph the grass in its diversity as the park staff try to make it more homogenous. “I try to fly with humility,” he assures us, “and the birds seem to ignore me and not get aggressive.”

Since the sixties, monk parakeets, native to South America, have settled in cities from New York to Barcelona. Not seeing them at Green-Wood today makes Baldwin unhappy. “The world may be going to hell, but I’m going to take you to Brooklyn and show you some parrots!” Baldwin says. “It brings tremendous hope—so I can’t bring people here and say there’s no hope!” I wonder what is it about these parakeets that so charms people—what sets them apart from other city birds. Baldwin says, “How does it make you feel when you see a sparrow?” Kind of meh. “You don’t marvel at it, but you’re not horrified. Pigeons have a certain emotional valence. Kids chase them like rats, but they’re not as threatening. The starlings behave like little goons for landlords, kicking other birds out of their nests. If you see a hawk, you’re like, ‘Oh my god this is a symbol and omen . . .’” —and as he’s saying this, the wind stirs, bells ring and five parakeets swoop in. “They’re here!” Baldwin hollers. “The community is asserting itself!”



The monk parakeets (also called Quaker parrots: Parakeets are a subspecies of parrots characterized by their smaller size and long, pointed tail; every parakeet is a parrot, but not every parrot is a parakeet) fly swiftly with their wings level. Nearly twelve inches long, with elegant, gradated tails, their brilliant lime-green backs, and blue-tipped wings splash joy against a dull sky. They circle the gate’s spires, blithely ignoring limestone panels depicting the resurrections of Lazarus and Jesus. They pop into their nest chambers, chattering

incessantly, moving a twig here and there with their feet. Some have described the sound of parakeet chatter as metallic or shrill, but to me, it's sweet and melodic. These five parakeets are something like a third of the population of this nest. With grey hooded heads, grey bellies, and grey feet, they appear as if in religious attire—the monks of their name.

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On a residential block in Midwood, near Brooklyn College, the monk parakeets have constructed a magnificent nest that hangs from a tree like a pendulous ornament for giants. Tatyana Brisard, a recent graduate, leads parrot patrols that provide a record of changes in the parrots' environment. She sets up a camera and identifies the nest by number, local coordinates, date, and weather. She photographs it from a standard angle, records activity for a few minutes, and then moves on to the next nest. The day I trail her, the parrots must be off foraging: The nest is empty. Brissard works with Frank Grasso, a scientist at the college, who has been observing the parakeets for nearly twenty years. His parrot patrols (a changing group of a dozen or so trained citizen scientists) have identified 190 nest sites in Brooklyn, which they visit four times per year on the equinox and solstice. Grasso is struck by the parakeets' resilience and their ability to cooperate in construction and maintenance of their nests, as well as in the raising of their fledglings—"a rare thing in traditional competitive views of parenting among parrots." He sees their extended society as a model for thinking about how city people can positively coexist. "The birds stay together in flocks in Brooklyn, mixed in with sparrows and pigeons, with larger social groups than just their pair."

Standing quietly with Brisard and her recording gear, I grow aware of all the urban sensory signals that I screen out daily—from the jingle of a dog's collar to a passerby's shoe scraping the sidewalk. Among the many delights of time spent with urban wildlife is the reminder to be quiet and patient, and to observe, and listen—not an easy task for a New Yorker.



Eleanor Miele, a molecular biologist, speaks to me about the parakeets by phone from the parking lot at Whole Foods in Gowanus, where her electric car is juicing up. “They’re beautiful, noisy, charismatic, and gregarious,” she says. In the early 2000s, she could look out her office window at Brooklyn College and see monk parakeets cavorting above the school’s grassy athletic fields. She devised a class project that put her Brooklyn College students to work documenting the behavior of the monk parakeets. “The parakeets are generalists and very adaptable.” Miele says, “In a rapidly changing environment, the species that are generalists are more likely to succeed, versus those that specialize, who will either migrate or fail.” When the grass fields outside her window were replaced with artificial turf in 2006, she tells me, some of the birds adapted by moving deeper into Midwood, while others just shrugged and rebuilt their nests on the lighting fixtures above the turf, foraging elsewhere for grass seeds. Monk parakeets originated from a temperate climate and do just fine in winter, sometimes warming up by huddling with their family in their nest. Although there are many “introduced” (not native) bird species in New York City—think sparrows, starlings and pigeons—Miele sees monk parakeets in particular as true city birds—hardy and adaptable. “My family are immigrants, my students are immigrants, and the parrots are a good point of entry for my students to explore how a new arrival to New York City adapts,” she says.

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Do they talk? everyone asks. Yes, they do. Monk parakeets are excellent mimics, and those that once were pets have been heard to call out in the voices of the owners who abandoned them: “Fuck you.” “Shut up.”

Barry and Gayle Schwartz have fifty parrots, two of them monk parakeets. The male, JulieMo, and the female, Sapphire, have been together for thirteen years. Sometimes JulieMo coughs as if he has emphysema (he’s perfectly healthy), so the Schwartzes think he must have lived with a heavy smoker. The Schwartzes live in Maspeth, Queens, a double-ticket neighborhood, as they say (you need to take a subway and a bus to get there), and they have been rescuing parrots since 2005. They now run Feathered Friends Parrot Adoption Services, but of the fifty parrots, only one is up for adoption. The Schwartzes tend to bond quickly with the birds and fold them into their large bird family. They’ve dedicated their dining room to their smaller parrots (conures and monks), and their basement to the larger ones (macaws and African greys), and to enter the cacophonous parrot-caves is to feel like a new arrival to the city being met with sirens and horns.

The Schwartz home is for the misfit birds—the injured, the unloved, the abandoned. Every bird has a story, and the Schwartzes delight in telling them. A miele amazon parrot came in with a bum foot so no one wanted her. Now, she’s forty-one, blind in one eye, and part of the Schwartz family. Barry says he taught their three African Greys—Willy, Coco, and Lucky—to perform the Three Stooges’ “Hello, hello, hello” routine (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdTRq3lXnXA>), which, alas, they wouldn’t do in my presence.

Barry, a geologist and former punk rocker, sees the monk parakeets as survivors. “It’s a unique thing to see a wild parrot in these latitudes,” he says. “They’re kind of a smarty-pants bird,” adds Gayle. “The quakers get given away because they can get loud and nippy.” The Schwartzes’ parrots have an eating and flying schedule, so each can exercise its muscles, and on Sundays the birds listen to “Breakfast with the Beatles.”

Monk parakeets do not migrate, and are not native, and thus are not protected by the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, so in 2010 the Schwartzes worked with New York State Senator Joseph Addabbo Jr. to introduce “The Monk Parakeet Protection Bill,” which would provide protection for the city’s wild parakeets, while also allowing for the humane relocation of nests deemed intrusive by the Parks Department or Con Edison. The bill remains in limbo in the Senate Environmental Conservation Committee. Meanwhile, Barry

Schwartz recalls the time he stood in a cherry picker in a hazmat suit to help move fledgling monk parakeets from their nest in a lighting fixture above a Little League field in Throgs Neck in the Bronx. He helped to gently place them in incubators headed to a Rhode Island bird sanctuary where they live today.

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“The pigeon may be the bird that represents New York City,” says Joseph Borker, who has been birding at Green-Wood Cemetery since the ’70s, “but the monk parakeet is the iconic bird of Brooklyn.” Why? Because it’s social, loud, intelligent, colorful, adaptable, and lives among many different birds. Borker is unconvinced by the story of a flock of monk parakeets fleeing from an open shipping crate at JFK. “There’s no doubt that they were escapees of the pet store trade,” he argues. How else to explain the way monk parakeets suddenly appeared in multiple US cities, from Chicago and Miami, to Austin and Portland, Oregon? He thinks the cemetery could do a better job of attracting birds by letting some grass grow wild so the birds have more seeds to eat, and cleaning the ponds to minimize lawn pesticide and embalming fluids that leak into the water. Green-Wood stands on the highest point in Brooklyn and attracts migrating birds like warblers, finches, and great blue herons. Borker concedes that “It’s not a bird sanctuary. I’m a realist. Their first priority is to the graves.”



In the back of Borker's car trunk is an extra pair of Swarovski binoculars, which he lends me after scoffing at my amateur ones. Then he sets up a scope. Through the lens I see a bird perched at the top of a pine tree—that lush lime-green color, that long elegant tail, that scoop-like beak. Quizzically the bird moves its head, listening, observing; perhaps it is the sentinel for the group, keeping a lookout for the hawk that sometimes dives down in the area causing frenzied chatter. While four other monks fly in and out of their nest in the gate, this one sits tall and alert. After more than forty years of birding, Borker says he has “learned patience and humility. You learn your place in the world.”

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Conversations about the monk parakeets circle around to the tragic story of the Carolina parakeet, the only parrot native to the United States. In the early twentieth century, this parrot was hunted to extinction, derided as an agricultural pest and cherished for its beautiful feathers, which looked dandy in a hatband. The monk parakeet doesn't replace the Carolina one, but it does offer a do-over of sort. Steve Baldwin explains: “An entire species was destroyed. Mother Nature is saying we have another chance. It's possible in a mythological framework to say, humankind has committed this terrible sin and yet parrots are back. They weren't sent down in pods by God, but they wound up here, so let's observe them, care for them, at least not wipe them out. That would be unforgivable.”^o