

## MITRED PARAKEETS (*Aratinga mitrata*) IN QUEENS AND NASSAU COUNTIES, NEW YORK

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On two occasions in recent years, while walking between my apartment and the subway station in urban Forest Hills, Queens County, New York, I have encountered the anomalous spectacle of a flock of large, noisy, bright-green and red parrots. Other passers-by were as impressed as I, and each time a crowd gathered in amazement.

The birds were Mitred Parakeets (*Aratinga mitrata*), and I learned that local birders have been aware of their presence in Queens County and southwestern Nassau County in recent years. The purpose of this article is to document several recent sightings and to provide a summary of what is known regarding the origin, abundance, distribution, and possible breeding of these charismatic parrots in New York City and western Long Island.

My most recent sighting in Forest Hills was on 13 April 2009, when I found a flock of 15 birds in front of an apartment building at 78-11 Kew Forest Lane. I observed them from 4:15-4:35 p.m. More than two years earlier, on 24 February 2007, I observed a flock of 13 birds in the same location, for approximately 15 minutes at 11:00 a.m. In both instances, the birds were feeding on the berries of two hackberry trees (*Celtis occidentalis*). The trees were bare, the berries persisting through the winter. On 13 April 2009, I was fortunate to have binoculars with me. Also notable on this occasion was that the birds were actively exploring the eaves of the apartment building, as if searching for hollows and potential nesting sites. On both occasions the flock flew off toward the west, squawking loudly in chorus.

The identification of these birds as *A. mitrata* was established as follows: They had long tails and overall were bright green. A trace of red, orange or yellow (at most a few feathers) was visible on the bend of the wing ("wrist") on some birds; most had only green there. The underwing coverts were green, with some yellow mottling on a few birds, but no red. Some birds had completely red faces, with bright red from the crown to the chin, and all around the eye. On 13 April 2009, at least three of the birds had red restricted to the forehead, with patchy orange, yellow, and green feathers on the rest of the face, and no red around the eye. This is consistent with the identification of these individuals as immatures (Juniper and Parr 1998, Arndt 2006). All birds had a white orbital ring. Some birds had brown on the forehead just above the bill. The birds had numerous red, orange or yellow feathers on the body, the sides of the head and nape. A number of birds showed variation on the facial pattern, with intermediate amounts of red feathering.

Several *Aratinga* species in the United States may be confused with *A. mitrata*, especially in immature plumages. However, none of these are currently

naturalized in the northeastern U.S. Most similar is the Red-masked Parakeet (*A. erythrogenys*) (Butler 2005, Pranty and Garrett 2003). This species has more red in the bend of the wing than *A. mitrata*, and red at the leading edge of the underwing coverts. The Green Parakeet (*A. holochlora*) lacks any patches of red on the forehead and crown.

The Monk Parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*) is established in the New York City metropolitan area. Colonies exist locally throughout. It has a pale gray forehead and breast, and the flight feathers and wing coverts are extensively blue, both above and below. These are sometimes useful field marks for fly-over birds.

The Black-hooded Parakeet (*Nandayus nenday*) was confirmed breeding in 1980 in Westchester County (Andrle and Carroll 1988). These birds, numbering approximately six, perished in a cold snap in December 1980. Probable breeding of single pairs was observed in Brooklyn and Nassau County in 1984. The species has not been recorded in our area recently. Field marks distinguishing Black-hooded Parakeet include the sooty-black frontal portion of the head, and pale blue wash on the upper breast.

*A. mitrata* is native to southwestern South America, from southern Peru and western Bolivia to northern Argentina. It is found in a variety of temperate zone habitats including montane evergreen and deciduous forest, cultivated areas, and open shrub land, savannah, and woodland (Juniper and Parr 1998). It is typically found at 1000-3500m elevation, and has been recorded to 4000m in Peru. It is often found around tall rock faces. It nests in such locations, or in tree cavities.

In North America, naturalized populations of *A. mitrata* are found in California and Florida (Butler 2005). In Los Angeles and Orange Counties, California, populations increased from the 1980s to the 1990s. Estimates are of several hundred to more than 1000 birds, and these birds are believed to be *A. m. tucumana* ("Tucuman" Mitred Parakeet: California Parrot Project, 2009). Pranty and Garret (2003) identify the Mitred Parakeets in Florida and California as the nominate subspecies, *A. m. mitrata*. The American Ornithologists Union added the species to the AOU North America checklist in 2002, considering the southern California populations established (Banks et al. 2002). However, the species is not on the American Birding Association Checklist or on any checklist established by state bird records committees (Pranty and Garrett 2003).

Arndt (2006) proposed taxonomic revisions to the *A. mitrata* complex. Using the new taxonomy, the identification of the Queens birds is consistent with the subspecies *A. m. tucumana* ("Tucuman" Mitred Parakeet), of northwestern Argentina. Identification features include the red feathers about the body, the sides of the head, and the nape; and the completely red faces of the adult birds. There is substantial variation in plumage among Mitred Parakeets due to age, sex, and possible inbreeding. Additional study is needed to establish sub-specific identification.

To my knowledge, there is no documentation in the scientific literature of naturalized Mitred Parakeets in New York or the northeastern U.S. In fact, substantial documentation of Mitred Parakeets in New York is virtually non-existent. The species has not been recorded on any Christmas bird count, or in

the Atlas of Breeding Birds of New York State. I have investigated the available anecdotal information, through newspaper articles, Internet searches, and conversations and e-mail with various individuals. The information from these sources has not been entirely consistent, and large gaps exist. Nevertheless, I believe it provides a generally reliable picture of the origin, status and distribution of the New York population.

Upon posting my 13 April 2009 sighting to the NYSBirds Listserv, I was contacted by a homeowner in the Hillcrest Estates section of Queens. He stated that Mitred Parakeets had been visiting each spring since 2006 to feed on the blossoms of two ornamental cherry trees in his front yard. He said he had first seen them this year on 14 April. On 18 April, I went to Hillcrest Estates and observed 15 Mitred Parakeets, feeding on cherry blossoms. I took several photographs (e.g., Fig. E, p. 265) of at least five individuals, one of which showed no red around the eye. I have little doubt that these were the same birds I observed on 13 April in Forest Hills, just 1.7 miles away. Follow-up communications with the homeowner indicated that the birds continued to visit through 20 April. The homeowner also provided photographs of an immature bird that visited in 2006 (Fig. F, p. 265).

A number of birders have said they have seen the birds, and have provided valuable information. But I have been unable to obtain any field notes or specific information to establish precise dates, locations, and numbers.

Sightings of these birds often generate interest among the general public. Marc Morrone, owner of "Parrots of the World", in Rockville Centre, New York, has been the recipient of many public inquiries, and thus a key source of information on the birds. He has been involved in a number of newspaper accounts (e.g., Rhoades 2006, Strum 1999). I discussed the birds with him over the telephone on 18 April 2009.

The origin of the birds remains speculative. Two possibilities have been mentioned: escape of a number of birds from a pet trade shipment at a New York airport (usually stated to be J.F.K. Airport), or that birds escaped from captivity in several separate incidents, and found one another. The time period of the population's origin is reliably established between 1979 and 1984.

Over 140,000 Mitred Parakeets were captured for the pet trade and imported to the U.S. from 1981-1990, including over 35,000 birds from Bolivia and at least 108,000 from Argentina (Pranty and Garrett 2003). New York is among three primary ports for the importation of wildlife from the American tropics to the U.S. (Pranty, pers. comm.). Escape of very small numbers of the imported birds during transport or quarantine could explain the numbers of Mitred Parakeets that have been documented in our area to this day. These might also be supplemented by escaped pets or local aviculture breeding stock.

In addition to the two aforementioned Queens locations, there is information on sightings of the birds in the following localities: Forest Park, Kew Gardens, Rosedale, and Cunningham Park, in Queens County; and the Five Towns (a collective name for the communities of Lawrence, Cedarhurst, Woodmere, Inwood, and Hewlett in the Town of Hempstead), Merrick, Lynbrook, Malverne, East Rockaway, Oceanside, and Valley Stream, in Nassau

County. The birds may range as far east as Massapequa, and north to Eisenhower State Park in Nassau (Morrone, pers. comm.), but the primary area appears to be southwestern Nassau County. They also occur in Queens west of Forest Hills, at locations unknown, as I have seen them flying off in that direction. It is approximately nine miles from Forest Hills to the Five Towns, and 15 miles from the Five Towns to Massapequa.

The Merrick locality derives from a sighting of my own. I recall seeing a flock of parrots in the backyard of the home where I grew up. They were feeding on the waxy fruits of an *Arborvitae*. By newspaper accounts at the time, I concluded they were Mitred Parakeets. The latest date this could have been was 1984. Most recently, an account in *Newsday* on 30 April 2009 reported that a flock of “about 20” Mitred Parakeets were seen sunning on the roof of a house in Malverne about a week earlier. These may be the same 15 birds recently seen around Queens. Also, several birds were photographed in Kew Gardens, Queens, as reported on 4 May (Brooklyn Parrots 2009).

Although 15 or so birds have been seen recently around Queens, there are also several reports on the Internet of a flock numbering 25 to as many as 40 birds around southwestern Nassau County in winter 2008-09. These numbers probably represent most or all of the current population of feral Mitred Parakeets in the area.

In 1999, Mitred Parakeets were seen in Central Park, Manhattan. According to an account in the *New York Times*, the birds were first recorded in the Central Park bird log on 18 March, and were present until at least 30 March (Strum 1999). Verbal accounts indicate there may have been between 10 and 30 birds. Morrone believes these birds split from the Queens/Nassau flock. What became of them is unknown. In any case, the small local population does not appear to be increasing significantly. I also received a report that Mitred Parakeets were seen in Central Park circa 1993.

In contrast to Mitred Parakeet populations in California and Florida, which are widespread in several metropolitan areas, the relatively restricted range of the birds in New York, mostly near J.F.K. Airport, suggests that J.F.K. may have been a primary locus for the origin of the population during the period when large numbers of birds were imported.

Most, if not all, sightings have been from winter through early spring (generally February to May). There is very little evidence of the whereabouts of the birds from June through January. Morrone stated that the birds gather to search for food in winter, and typically break into smaller groups the remainder of the year. This is consistent with the habits of *A. mitrata* in its native range, where large flocks gather to feed on maize and seasonal fruits, and is similar to the behavior of naturalized flocks in southern California (Collins and Kares 1997).

The consistency in the dates and locations of the recent Queens sightings suggests a coherent naturalized flock, with birds that have learned favorable feeding locations. Even so, it is unlikely that even this long-lived species could have persisted for decades at the levels observed recently without new introductions or local breeding—a point further reinforced by the presence of

immature birds in the recently observed flocks. The most direct evidence that the birds are breeding locally involves Morrone's report that he saw a nest with two adult birds and several young in the aluminum siding of a house in Rosedale, Queens, circa 1987. He also stated that in the late 1990s, someone brought him a fledgling from Cunningham Park, Queens.

Much is still unknown about our local Mitred Parakeets, and there remains little evidence that the species is becoming established in New York. I hope this article will inspire local birders to seek out these birds and provide additional documentation, so that we can learn more. I welcome birders to contact me if they have additional information.

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