



Polly wants an apple

Ring-necked parakeets have made themselves at home across London and beyond, but how did these birds come to swap tropical climes for our grey shores, asks Claire Jackson

THE final notes of the overture to Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* end triumphantly, but, as applause ripples through the Opera Holland Park audience, there is a loud, prolonged squawk. Figaro and Susanna's appraisal of their soon-to-be marital quarters is interrupted by hecklers from a nearby horse-chestnut tree. It appears the parakeets are not fans of opera comic. For some, the birds' calls—the occasional peacock also makes its presence known—enhance the charming setting at the former London home of the Earl of Ilchester, but others rattle at the penetrating squalls. They're not only in Holland Park: ring-necked parakeets have made themselves well and truly at home across London, with colonies now spreading throughout England and beyond; there have even been recent sightings in Scotland. But how did these gregarious green avians come to swap tropical climes for our grey shores?

‘They bring a touch of glamour to bird tables, like well-groomed strangers’

Wild parakeets were first documented in the UK in 1970, when they were observed living in London parks. It was speculated that the flocks originated from birds released from the set of *The African Queen* at Shepperton Studios in 1951. Similarly, Jimi Hendrix is said to have freed his parakeets along Carnaby Street. As tantalising as these tales are, it's unlikely that today's birds can be traced directly to these escapees. However, the first breeding pairs were undoubtedly former pets; the ring-necked parakeet was a popular addition to Victorian households attracted to its bright plumage.

Less attractive were the parrot's frequent and resonant vocalisations, which may have contributed to multiple releases. Some birds escape of their own accord: the artist Mouse Macpherson (*The mouse that roared*, August 4, 2021), wrote of the 'black day' when her love birds flew out of an open window. Frequent releases and favourable circumstances—in

the parakeets' case, well-stocked urban parks and rising temperatures—enabled the birds to become established.

The acidic-green parrots bring a touch of glamour to bird tables, like well-groomed strangers at a cocktail party, and their iridescence evokes exotic landscapes (their native range is a broad belt of arid, tropical countryside stretching from west Africa across lowland India, south of the Himalayas). With an estimated population of as many as 25,000 pairs, the parakeets are now a firm fixture. But there are concerns about the impact the birds may have on native species, particularly other nest-hole birds, such as woodpeckers, nuthatches and starlings.

'Human activity is driving down biodiversity at a local, national and global scale,' says Paul Walton, head of habitats and species at RSPB Scotland. 'There are five key elements: habitat degradation, climate change, exploitation of natural resources, pollution and invasive non-native species.' The parakeets fall into the last category and, like the introduction of rhododendrons to Scotland's temperate rainforests, they have the potential to cause serious issues. 'People have moved animals and plants around the world deliberately, but, more often, accidentally and allowed them to establish in areas to which they are not native,' explains Dr Walton. 'The principal drivers of biodiversity loss work in synergy, so the parakeets are able to develop strongholds in the UK due to milder winters.'

The parakeet's recent spread beyond the capital has led to mutterings about Government intervention, but it has been announced that culling will not go ahead—partly because

the population is too well established and also there isn't yet enough evidence of the impact on native species to justify controversial and complex measures. Controlling a bird that thrives in populated areas, especially gardens and public spaces, is rife with complications.

Dr Walton asserts that the RSPB is a 'Nature conservation organisation, not an animal-welfare organisation' and, although the official stance is that the body is 'not in favour of a cull of parakeets at this time', he emphasises that 'we need to keep a close eye on the situation'.

The Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens is a not-so-secret spot for close encounters with parakeets. No self-respecting Londoner would be seen dead here, but, as an out-of-towner (and owner of the Emma Bridgewater parakeet mug), I have no shame in joining the tourists covered with green-feathered friends. I intend to stick to strictly journalistic observation, but, when a small child offers me her apple to attract a nearby bird, it's impossible to resist. Within moments, a parakeet lands on the fruit in my waiting hand, allowing me to stroke its head. I send a photograph to a friend who grew up in north London. 'Hate them so much,' she replies.

Feeding parakeets is not encouraged in any of the Royal Parks. The charity launched a campaign called 'Keep Wildlife Wild', which asks visitors to refrain from bringing food for animals. Hyde Park attracts 13 million visitors each year, which equates to a lot of apples for parakeets. The subsequent overcrowding can bring disease and further upset the ecosystem. Once again, humans are at the heart of the UK's parakeet problem. 🐦

Parrot fever

• **The earliest sighting of a wild ring-necked parakeet in the UK was in 1855, when one was spotted in Norfolk**

• Ring-necked parakeets, as are all birds, are protected in the wild under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. The species can be controlled under licence

where there is evidence of a threat to native species, damage to crops or for air-safety purposes

• **Media coverage of 'parrot fever', a rare, but potentially fatal disease, may have caused an increase of releases in the 1950s**

• The case of the parakeet is not an isolated one.

'There are issues in freshwater areas where terrapins have been released and established,' says RSPB Scotland's Paul Walton. The import of red-eared sliders was banned in 1997, due to concerns about the numbers of feral animals, but pet owners switched to yellow-bellied terrapins, which have been sighted in British waterways

