

BIRDS

Suburban parrots make home in Santa Cruz 'jungle'

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THE FOG and quiet of Lighthouse Field is split by bloodcurdling screams and squawks, yet early-morning surfers and joggers hardly bat an eye. Is it robbery, assault, murder most fowl? No, it's just the parrots. They live out here.

Parrots? Living in the fog and cypress trees of Santa Cruz? It seems a chilly and unlikely home for these bright tropical seed-eaters, yet small flocks of parrots were reported to live at Lighthouse Field as long as 10 years ago.

"There are two to six pair living in Lighthouse Field," said J. Daniel Young, a local officer for the Surfrider Foundation. "I think they're Mexican Reds. When we were building the Surf Museum, they'd come out at 8 or 9 a.m., do a couple of passes over the point and fly back into the trees."

In addition to the parrots, local surfer John Manss has spotted three black-masked conures in Lighthouse Field.

"They've been living there a long time, five or six years," said Manss. "They seem to be happy in their little range."

In addition to the sundry conures and Mexican parrots, city residents have reported sighting South American macaws, African parrots and even an occasional Australian cockatoo in their trees and gardens.

Many of the birds are escapees, or have been set free by owners who couldn't stand the noise any longer. But some may be bona fide Santa Cruz natives, offspring of escaped jungle-born parents who liked the neighborhood, and decided to stay. The birds seem to prefer the Seabright, Lighthouse Field and Eastside neighborhoods, where they raid fruit trees and wake up the neighbors with their early-morning screeching.

Seabright resident Molly Zak recently noticed a pair of conures frequenting the plum trees in her yard.

"They're bright green with blue heads," said Zak. "They're not at all people-friendly. I went

over to talk to them and one just sat up there nonchalantly eating a fruit, and the other flew away."

IRONICALLY, at a time when these exotic animals are rapidly becoming extinct in their native habitats, some are adapting quite successfully to life in the suburbs of California.

Amazon parrots are among the most successful species. Flocks numbering from 6 to 40 members can be found in cities as unlikely as Sacramento, Hayward, Fremont, San Leandro and Pacific Grove. Amazons generally live 20 to 30 years in the wild.

"They are very, very adaptable," said Bruce Sasak, curator of the California Psittacine Institute. "Especially if they get loose in the summertime and have a chance to acclimate. They grow 'down feathers' to cope with the cold weather. Many of the larger parrots are from the Andes region; they can even survive a light snowfall."

Early morning commuters in San Francisco's Mission District often are treated to the sight of dozens of green Amazon parrots crawling around in the enormous date palms of Dolores Park, while the forest at nearby Buena Vista park serves as a home for several additional species.

In Los Angeles, flocks numbering in the hundreds thrive on the exotic fruit trees that grow in neighborhood gardens.

"They have become urban and suburban birds," said Kimball Garrett, a bird specialist with the Los Angeles Audubon Society. "While you're commuting on the freeway you see flocks of them flying over. There are six or eight species that seem to be established, and many others that just escape from time to time. You can see just about anything flying around out here."

Nobody really knows how many parrots are living in California. The Audubon Society does not include sightings of parrots or other exotics in their annual bird count because they are not considered native species.

But how long does it take to be considered a native? According to Audubon parrot specialist Jeffrey Froke, the parrots in Los Angeles

have been around since at least 1952.

Froke wrote a thesis on the parrots living in California's San Gabriel Valley, which may be the only study ever conducted on these birds. Froke found that the parrots have very little impact on native birds or ecology.

"One major justification for the work I did was that there was so much speculation and general fears of the parrots and their impact," said Froke. "There appears to be no substantial prob-

lems of competition with native birds. Out of more than 50 food sources I observed, all but one were exotic trees, mostly tropical ornamental species.

"When they feed from plum or peach trees, they are going for the pits," he said. "They may eat a little fruit incidentally, but it's the seed they're after. They don't often wander into agricultural areas because they prefer the suburbs — the open areas, the large trees for gathering and the variety of food."

Though parrots have been

notorious for carrying psittacosis, "parrot fever" that can be transferred to humans, Froke says that the disease is much more common among captive birds than among their free-flying relatives.

"The few birds we've found dead or have captured have been clean," said Froke. "But people who try catching parrots or raiding nests are putting themselves at risk of catching the disease."

While escaped birds can usually find plenty to eat, it is more difficult for them to find

places to nest. Parrots prefer to nest in large holes in trees, which are not that common in most well-tended suburbs. And like most tropical birds, parrots breed relatively infrequently and lay small clutches of eggs.

Though most parrot populations are now small and localized, there is a possibility that they will eventually establish themselves in cities across California.

"It's all speculation," said Froke. "But there could be a future for them here."

