

THE CAROLINA PARAKEET IN NEW YORK AND ONTARIO: A REVIEW AND A FOOTNOTE

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One early check-list of birds of the state of New York merely included the Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) and referred to it as "historic" (Farr 1900, 399). A recent critical examination of New York birds consider it as "Extinct. Hypothetical. Sight records only" (Reilly and Parkes 1959, 24).

The curious birdwatcher may want to know how historic the records and how substantial the sightings.

Part of the mischief began with Audubon, who summarized things broadly by saying that formerly the species had been found "sometimes as far north-east as Lake Ontario," clearly a reference to New York but not substantiated by him in any specific citations (1831, 138). Elon Howard Eaton followed Audubon without adding anything (1901, 37; 1911-1914, vol. 2, pp. 129, 130). The same is also true of Vaughan MacCaughey; indeed, he claimed the parakeet as "a bird of Chautauqua" more as an object lesson than for substantive reasons (1917, p. 16).

Neither Alexander Wilson (1811) nor any of his predecessors mentioned any Lake Ontario records, so the burden of proof for that reference rests upon Audubon and his followers. But Wilson did cite a New York record, one that was curiously ignored by Audubon. It had been reported a few years previously by Professor Benjamin Smith Barton. Barton had been told by Egbert Benson, Esq., of the State of New York, that "a very large flight of parakeets . . . came from the westward . . . a few years ago, about twenty-five miles to the north-west of Albany The arrival of these birds in the depth of winter [footnote: "In January, 1780"] was, indeed, a very remarkable circumstance. The more ignorant Dutch settlers were exceedingly alarmed. They imagined, in dreadful consternation, that it portended nothing less than the destruction of the world" (Barton 1799, pt. VI, p. vi).

Bent incorrectly referred to this as the oldest record of the eastern and southern race; he was correct to call it the northernmost (1940, p. 2). But Bent was quite unhappy in following DeKay, who placed the event in the year 1795. DeKay also, with entirely uncalled for precision, supposed the birds "probably transported by a whirlwind" (1844, p. 183). Aside from the whole matter of the so-called Albany visitation, wherein he differed from Audubon who did not mention it, DeKay uncritically followed Audubon on other matters in regard to the parakeet.

Error begat error. Although Nuttall did not date the "Albany" incursion (1840, p. 647), Ridgway twice referred to Nuttall's works as source and yet attributed the date of 1790 to the flight (1916, pp. 145, 146). (Nuttall, of course, got his information not from Barton but from Wilson, who likewise did not date the event.)

As I have pointed out (1959), the date of January 1780 was correctly given by Barton in the first place. It was also independently confirmed by Francisco de Miranda's diary of 1784, first published in 1928. He reported that the visit of the parakeets took place at "Schoharie, a delightful location forty miles from Albany." The whole episode is well accounted for by Miranda and clearly attributed to "the year 79-80 in the winter." Schoharie is very nearly directly west of Albany and the distance is somewhat less than 40 miles. The house where they appeared, Miranda continued, was the first residence destroyed by the next invasion of British troops, thus confirming in the minds of the superstitious people there the preternatural bearing upon events of the unusual visit by the parakeets (Miranda, 1928, pp. 72-73; 1963, p. 99).

So much for the most venerable—and most frequently confused—of the sightings of parakeets in New York. A recent work on the ornithology of the Niagara Frontier added one other reference (Beardslee and Mitchell 1965, pp. 273-274); in spite of their thorough search of literature, it was their only improvement upon the early Audubon claim.

The second Beardslee and Mitchell reference was to Bergtold (1927), who belatedly published an account of a conversation with David F. Day in 1889. Day, an attorney in Buffalo and a competent amateur botanist and reliable birdwatcher, "once saw thirteen Carolina Parquets light on the old City Buildings, Cor. of Franklin and Eagle Streets, and . . . he knew of a lot being captured at West Seneca (N.Y.) many years ago." Buffalo, of course, is on Lake Erie, not Lake Ontario, so this is no comfort to Audubon; West Seneca is an Erie County suburb of Buffalo.

There is a dubious report of a parrot of some kind from the New York City area in the book written by Charles Wooley (or Wolley) first published in 1701. It purports to be an account of New York and "its territories in America," but all the talk within it seems to be of New York and Long Island. When Wooley left after a two-year stay (he had arrived in 1678), he took with him a "Grey Squirrel, a Parret and a Rockoon, the first Lady Sherard . . . had some years at Stapleford, the second, I left at London . . ." (1860). There is no way of knowing whether it was the native parakeet. Perhaps more probably it was an exotic waif from some sailor's visit: ". . . the Parot was a pratling familiar bird, and diverting company in my solitary intervals upon our Voyage home." It even once fell into the sea in a calm and helped

effect its own rescue by hooking its bill into a rope that was thrown to it. The latter behavior seems in character for the Carolina Parakeet, according to old accounts; but if "pratling" means "talkative," that is another matter, for the species is generally given low marks on ability to "talk."

The only other account of a parakeet in the region of New York City concerns a very tenuous report from northern New Jersey (W. F. Eaton 1936). See McKinley, 1979 (1981).

One ought not to ignore prehistory, but there is not much help from that quarter. I cannot find any reference to skeletal remains in Indian middens. William M. Beauchamp discussed the possibility that an Iroquois pottery pipe found in New York was an effigy of the parakeet (1898, p. 132). As I have shown in a review of the archeozoology of the parakeet in the *Central States Archaeological Journal* (McKinley 1977), it pretty certainly is not. Beauchamp noted rather ambiguously that "the Iroquois, however, seem to have known nothing of the parrot till they extended their wars southward, after the downfall of the Eries in the middle of the 17th century." Beauchamp must not be supposed to have been saying definitely that he knew of any evidence for connections of the Iroquois with parakeets after that time. Indeed, Beauchamp's history of Onondaga County (1908) faithfully cited ornithological works to that time. Although it contained an alert discussion of rarities, it contained no hint that parakeets had ever been known there.

And yet, if I were looking for evidence of parakeets in New York, Beauchamp's Onondaga County would be in the heart of the region where I should look hardest. Perhaps parakeets did visit western New York at times. The topography and, above all, the prevalence of salt springs, must have made the countryside attractive to them. An Onondaga effigy pipe in the National Museum of Natural History, showing what may be a figurine of a parakeet, with a collar around its neck as if a captive, comes to mind. It is from "Atwell's Works," clearly a salt-making site, and is illustrated and commented upon in the archeological account referred to above. Salt springs were not found or at least not worked east of the Otsego-Fulton county line; even those easterly springs yielded weakly saline water. The outcropping of the salt-spring producing rocks of the Salina group do go as far eastward as the valley of the Schoharie, where that formation is very narrow on the surface (Merrill 1893, frontispiece map and pp. 14-19). This may account for the presence of the parakeet flock at Schoharie in 1780, since the birds were very fond of salt licks; but a close and comprehensive study of travelers' journals, naturalists' lists and the like has failed to reveal anything of substance on the parakeet in early New York, aside from what I have given above.

As a footnote to what is itself hardly more than a footnote, there is the matter of the Carolina Parakeet to the north of New York, in Ontario. Actually, it is only a matter of disposing of a couple of allegations and a misinterpretation.

In 1703 Baron Lahontan published "A list of the fowl or birds that frequent the south countries of Canada," including "Parrots" among the species. But he later qualified this by saying: "The *Parrots* are met within the Illinese Country . . ." (1905, pp. 350,354). This was therefore, at most, just an Illinois account.

Some such all inclusive definition of "Canada" probably also accounts for the presence of "parrots" on altogether suspect lists for both "the southern parts of Canada" and for the "northern parts of Canada," (the latter referring to those species that visit during the milder seasons) by George Heriot (1807, pp. 516-517). Heriot was, after all, Deputy Post Master General of British North America—a rather indefinite region—and the lists were probably borrowed from other authors anyway. Furthermore, his accounts of two otherwise acceptable northern birds, loons and pigeons, are very wild. Under such circumstances, it is meaningless to give him credit for a species that is questionable in the first place.

The chief authority for some later uncritical regional lists of Ontario birds is none other than Audubon. He alleged that formerly parakeets had been found on Lake Ontario, as cited above. This undoubtedly meant only the southern shore of Lake Ontario in New York and even this never met with the questioning it deserved, for it is without substance.

A final allusion remains. Albert Hazen Wright pointed out a very curious reference to a parrot-like bird mentioned by Samuel de Champlain. It was late November 1615 and Champlain was "just north of Lake Ontario"—according to Wright (1912, p. 345); probably near present Kingston, according to my calculations. Champlain lost himself while chasing "a certain bird that seemed to me peculiar. It had a beak like that of a parrot, and was of the size of a hen. It was entirely yellow, except the head which was red, and the wings which were blue, and it flew by intervals like a partridge" (1878-1882, vol. 3, p. 140). It flew from tree to tree for a long time, drawing him onward in pursuit. If all the facts were as stated, the bird could only have been a quite aberrantly colored and perhaps malformed individual: but of what species I am unprepared to guess.

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