

THE CASE FOR ADDING CAROLINA PARAKEET (*Conuropsis carolinensis*) TO THE CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF NEW YORK STATE

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When the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs (now the New York State Ornithological Association, NYSOA) established the New York State Avian Records Committee (NYSARC) in 1977, it recognized the need to document and evaluate sight reports of birds in the state, especially for legal and ethical restrictions on collecting. This body functioned for 12 years before it published the first *Checklist of the Birds of New York State* in 1989 (Levine 1998). Today nearly every state in the United States has an official state bird checklist that is typically administered by a state avian records committee. State checklists are important references for listers but they also serve to educate the public about the status, breeding, and legal protection of individual species.

In 1977 when NYSARC began reviewing records, it made sense to use John Bull's *Birds of New York State* (1974) and its 1976 supplement as a starting point (Levine 1998). At that time Bull's book was widely accepted as the official state list by most of the New York birding community. It is interesting to note that Eaton (1910, 1914), the only other author to attempt a state book, listed 411 species for the state, while Bull applied different standards and acknowledged only 366 of these, adding an additional 44 species of his own. He also created a "hypothetical" category for some species, including Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*). Since 1974 thirteen of these hypothetical species have been added to the state checklist (NYSOA 2016). Able (1976) considered Bull's treatment of species uneven. Whereas Bull allowed for variation in the quality of specimen evidence, for instance considering even lost specimens valid if they had been verified by "competent ornithologists," he was overly critical of sight records, even in aggregate and when supported by circumstantial evidence.

Eaton (1910, 1914) and Beardslee and Mitchell (1965) included Carolina Parakeet as occurring in New York. DeKay (1844) called it extra-limital and Eaton considered it only of historic interest because by 1914 it had been extirpated from the state, but Beardslee and Mitchell listed it as an extinct summer resident. Here I argue that Carolina Parakeet once occurred in New York State. I propose that it be added to the *Checklist of the Birds of New York State* (NYSOA 2016) as an extinct species that was once part of New York's avifauna.

METHODS

To document the Carolina Parakeet's occurrence in New York I compiled four types of information: its historical global range, museum specimens and site records from New York and neighboring states, and the species' habitat requirements.

Historical Distribution—In an exhaustive review of the literature for *Birds of North America*, Snyder and Russell (2002) summarized what is known of the historical distribution of this bird in North America and concluded that the Carolina Parakeet occurred regularly in the eastern United States from southern Florida to coastal North Carolina and occasionally to Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. The range included the states along the Gulf of Mexico and states from Florida to Texas north and west to Colorado (Fig.1). This bird apparently never ventured into New England or Mexico, and the only evidence that it was ever in Canada comes from an archeological site in Ontario near Lake Erie where parakeet bones dated to 1100 AD were recovered. These could reflect either their natural distribution or native American trading.

Within this range its distribution was spotty and concentrated on rivers and tributaries. Snyder and Russell (2002) call migration doubtful, but many of the most northern records are from midwinter suggesting that this species wandered widely.

Specimens from Northeastern North America—I and others before me have been unable to find any specimens from New York State, which is not surprising since the bird was probably rare in the state and extirpated by the early 1900s (Hahn 1963, Greenway 1967, Bull 1974, VertNet 2016). Of the more than 800 specimens in existence, roughly 660 were taken in Florida in the second half of the 19th century (McKinley 1985). There is one specimen from Ohio and a partial skeleton from Pennsylvania (Hahn 1963, VertNet 2016) but apparently none from other states that border New York.

Sight Records from New York and Neighboring States—The first sight record from New York was reported in 1780 by Barton (1799) who wrote:

“I may add, that a very large flight of parakeets, which came from the westward, was seen, a few years ago, about twenty-five miles to the north-west of Albany, in the State of New-York. The arrival of these birds in the depth of winter was, indeed, a very remarkable circumstance. The more ignorant Dutch settlers were exceedingly alarmed. They imagined, in dreadful consternation, that it portended nothing less calamitous than the destruction of the world.”

For some reason DeKay (1844) published this New York record as occurring in 1785, but McKinley (1959) found a second report of this same event in the translated diary of Francisco de Miranda (1928), a famous South American revolutionist who visited Saratoga Springs when he toured the United States from 1783-1784. The translated text reports a “band” of parakeets in the winter of 1779-1780, an event never seen on this continent, and notes that the house near where they appeared was the first that the enemy burned soon after. McKinley suggests that the burning was done by British troops that invaded from Canada in October 1780. McKinley’s paper corrected DeKay’s error and places the Albany sighting in January 1780.

Audubon (1831) wrote that Carolina Parakeets were declining in number and had been more common 25 years ago, noting that during that time they could be procured sometimes as far northeast as Lake Ontario. Both Eaton (1910, 1914) and Beardslee and Mitchell (1965) cited this information from Audubon as evidence for including the bird as a part of New York’s avifauna.

Bergtold (1927) published a note regarding a conversation with David F. Day, a practicing attorney and naturalist, who many years earlier saw thirteen Carolina Parakeets on the old City Building at the corner of Franklin and Eagle Streets in Buffalo. Day also reported that a lot of parakeets were being captured at West Seneca, New York.

While the sighting has no date, we can assume it took place before December 20, 1889 when it was reported to Bergtold. This sight record was rejected by Bull (1974) as “hearsay” and he likely would not have seen Day as a competent ornithologist but Bergtold, who was a trained scientist, states that Day was such a good botanist that Asa Gray drew heavily upon his knowledge of the western New York flora in writing his *Manual of Botany*. He also noted that Day was “keenly interested in birds” and knew the local species well, and that he trusted Day’s records. This information led Beardslee and Mitchell (1965) to write that the Carolina Parakeet was once well-established in the Niagara Frontier but now extinct. They listed its status as “S.R. (summer resident) formerly.”

It is worth noting that there are also credible sight records from the neighboring states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Ohio (Eaton 1936, Turnbull 1869, Wilson 1811, McKinley 1977). A bird so distinctive and brightly colored is unlikely to be misidentified.

Habitat Requirements—The Carolina Parakeet was extinct before its ecology and life history could be well studied. The best information on its habitat requirements is found in the early writings of authors who lived when the bird was still extant. Wilson (1811) described their attraction to bottomland forests along the borders of rivers and streams. In the southern part of its range the species was found in cypress swamps, and wherever it occurred the birds gathered in large flocks at salt licks. They ate fruits, buds, seeds, and cockleburrs and severely damaged orchards and grain crops.

While the center of this species' range was certainly south and west of New York State, the birds were physically well adapted to survive winters in the Northeast. A recent study by Kirchman et al. (2012) demonstrated that the Carolina Parakeet is most closely related to South American parrots with broad distributions that include temperate climates. Their feathered ceres and communal roosting habits are generally seen as adaptations for cold tolerance. Nuttall (1832) noted that they were cold hardy enough to appear in St. Louis in winter and Wilson (1811) encountered a flock in Ohio during a snowstorm.

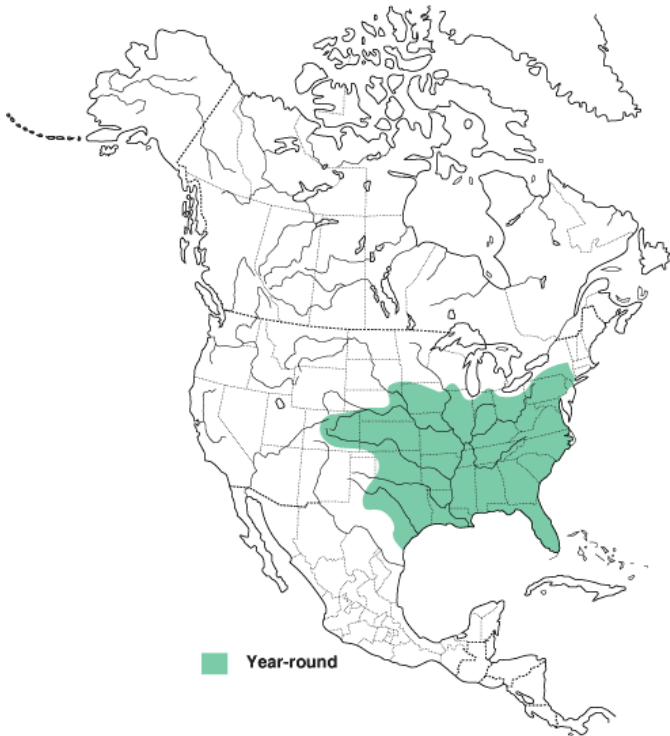


Figure 1. Approximate boundary of the early historical range of the Carolina Parakeet. The rarity of records for states northeast of North Carolina suggests that this portion of the range was occupied only erratically. Records are also rare to absent for most of the Appalachian Mountains. (From Snyder and Russell 2002, Birds of North America Online.)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is unlikely that the Carolina Parakeet was ever common in New York State but the evidence presented here suggests that it was probably present at the periphery of its range in the western part of the state. The birds likely colonized the North American continent from the south moving north via the rivers and streams of the Mississippi drainage, which reaches into western New York. Like other parrots, they probably wandered widely outside the breeding season. This behavior could account for occasional records from places like eastern New York and New Jersey.

Before European settlement New York had an abundance of bottomland hardwood forest that would have provided suitable nesting habitat for Carolina Parakeets. Central New York had enough salt to support commercial salt production in the nineteenth century and the birds could have found salt licks at a number of sites (Werner 1917). It seems plausible that the parakeets Day reported being captured in West Seneca were attracted to salt deposits (Judkins 2001). Anatomically and physiologically, the birds were well adapted to the New York climate.

It is not surprising that there are no New York specimens for this species. The bird was already quite rare in New York during the heyday of collecting in the mid nineteenth century and the last sight record in western New York was before 1889 (Bergtold 1927). The bird was an agricultural pest at a time when almost any edible species was used for food. Moreover, its feathers were bright and colorful and an important part of the feather trade, so it was unlikely that any of the few specimens from New York would ever find their way to a museum. Of the approximately 800 specimens in existence fewer than 50 can be tied to states other than Florida and there is only one from Ohio where the bird was supposedly plentiful (Hahn 1963). The absence of a New York specimen should not exclude this species from the New York State checklist.

While the sight records reported here seem casual by today's standards, they are typical for their time. DeKay, Eaton, and Beardslee and Mitchell, all trained ornithologists and curators writing books for important scientific institutions, found them credible enough to publish. Nearby New Jersey, and eleven other states with no specimen records, including Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin, all list Carolina Parakeet on their state bird lists as either a historical or extinct species (Larson et al. 2015, Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee 2015, Virginia Avian Records Committee 2015, Argabrite 2015, North Carolina Bird Records Committee 2014, South Carolina Bird Records Committee 2014, Beaton et al. 2003, Tennessee Ornithological Society 2014, Alabama Ornithological Society 2013, Indiana Audubon Society n.d., Iowa Ornithologists' Union n.d., Wisconsin Society for Ornithology 2015). In nearly every case the documentation consists of similarly old, informal sight records that are considered acceptable by historical standards.

NYSOA updates its *Checklist of the Birds of New York State* annually to incorporate new species accepted by NYSARC and taxonomic revisions made by the American Ornithologists' Union. This checklist is copyrighted and recognized as the official bird list for New York State, and, because of this, it is important for it to be accurate for all species, even ones that are no longer with us. Based on the information presented here I believe the NYSARC should correct the historical record on New York's avifauna and add Carolina Parakeet to the next *Checklist of the Birds of New York State* as an extinct species, along with Labrador Duck (*Camptorhynchus labradorius*) and Passenger Pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), which are already listed. I have submitted this information to NYSARC and I look forward to its decision.

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