

Outlaw or Artisan?

Quaker parrots make themselves at home in neighborhoods across the U.S.

By Ellen Feinstein Krueger

In suburban Boston, Massachusetts, Fonzie, my quaker parrot, weaves molted tail feathers into the bars of her cage. Each is carefully twisted and tucked, just so. Visitors to Fonzie's house marvel at the intricate patterns the parrot fashions with the feathers and strips of leather. She creates a classic basket weave, circles and arcs on the front, back and walls, even the ceiling. It's a wonder to behold.

On a utility pole along the Connecticut coastline, a wild quaker parrot flies to the base of a huge stick nest that rests against an electrical transformer. The bird jabs the end of a stick that is twice as long as his body into a snarl of twigs. Painstakingly, the quaker bends, pokes, weaves and trims the stick around the opening in the nest until it's just right. Visitors stand beneath the nest, necks craned, cameras snapping, marveling at the complex work of this feathered engineer.

Not far from the nest, however, the company that supplies electricity through that transformer does not have the same admiring attitude. The nests, and the birds that build them, are threats to the company's ability to keep the electricity flowing through the wires to the customers who depend on it.

Quakers Vs. Utilities

The past year has brought the quaker-to-human face-off to the brink of crisis. A Connecticut power company enacted a plan to control the quakers that included gassing them in their nests and sending them off to be exterminated. The company killed 187 quakers before a rapidly expanding and vocal group of quaker supporters raised such a ruckus that the utility suspended the project.

In New Jersey, activists literally fought city hall, or rather the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, and any other state agency that brands the birds "a potentially dangerous species." The New Jersey group also went nose to nose with a local electric and gas service company to prevent it from tearing down the nests on the power poles until March of 2006, when the harsh winter weather was past.

On the Internet, chat groups and web pages supporting the birds pass along any and all stories, rumors and tactics necessary to publicize the plight of these birds. Slogans are hatched. Bumper stickers are created. And a movement is born to support this charming "invasive species."

What inspires such passion about these birds? Where does the non-native quaker parrot belong? Ownership for other parrot species is not bound up in legal requirements. But when it comes to the quaker parrot, some states refuse to roll out the welcome mat. Vermont requires microchips or other valid identifying information of the breeder in any birds imported to the state, but that pales when compared to other state's laws concerning quakers.

In states like California and Kansas, where agriculture is the backbone of the economy, wild quakers are looked upon as a threat because of their eating habits and their ability to adapt and thrive in areas far from their native habitat of Argentina. But Dr. Donald Brightsmith, research associate at Duke University and conservation specialist, believes the bigger problem with wild quakers is their growing presence and penchant for nesting in power lines. Over the past few years, nests have been removed by utilities in Brooklyn, New York; Chicago, Illinois; and multiple areas in South Florida and Texas.

Addressing the laws against quakers as pets, Brightsmith said, "When importation was legal, thousands of parrots were brought into the U.S. All kind of parrots escaped by the hundreds [either by accident or release]. And that is what has led to the establishment of populations in Miami, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles. That's very different from breeders hand-raising them and selling them for large amounts of money to people as pets. Because if one or two birds escape, they don't establish a population. It takes hundreds escaping to establish." But the birds do multiply and that is a problem.

"The notorious reputation of the quakers for destroying crops was traced back to their native land (Argentina), where it was determined that most, if not all, of the farmers would use quakers as scapegoats to ensure that they would receive compensation for a poor crop yield by blaming it on them. It simply was not true," explained Alison Evans-Fragale

of New Jersey. Dr. Michael Gochfeld, who testified with Evans-Fragale's group in Trenton, studied the birds, in their natural environment as well as in the Northeast. His studies yield no such evidence — not even in the quaker's native lands.

Neighborhoods Unite

Evans-Fragale, a self-appointed champion of the wild quaker, or monk parakeet, was horrified by the efforts of the local power company to eliminate the huge quaker nests constructed on its transformers near her home. She organized a campaign to save the local birds and their nests. Her website, EdgewaterParrots.com documented the plight of the parrots. Through newspaper, Internet and radio and television coverage, the small story of this small parrot drew national attention, and the nests have been spared for the time being.

Donna Dwyer was in the trenches with the Connecticut quaker supporters when the utility company set up their eradication program. She wrote: "The eradication project was designed to eliminate 103 nests in West Haven, Milford, Stratford and Bridgeport. Most of these nests had been untouched for as much as eight years, according to the people living near the nests ... That night (November 18, 2005) we were alerted to capture in progress down a couple of blocks. We caught the tail end of the capture ... Although the utility company, the Department of Environmental Protection and The United States Department of Agriculture claim they are not spraying or using nothing in the nests to immobilize these birds for capture, I believe that they were. One would expect monk parakeets awakened and being pulled from their nest would be shrieking loudly, yet we heard no screams."

Alternative Solutions

In Texas, however, TXU Energy has shown some willingness to work with quaker advocates. The company has faced pressure from supporters who fought TXU's plans to remove the nests at its White Rock substation near Dallas. TXU spokesman Ray Averitt said, "We are committed to finding environmentally safe measures to keep birds from nesting in our equipment. We are currently looking at using items such as foam and intricate netting as means to discourage the nesting.

"We continue to discuss the problem with other utilities to try to find a solution that protects our equipment, provides for a safe work environment for our employees and contractors, and meets our commitment to the environment."

According to Averitt, "Unless there is a direct threat to electric reliability, we make every attempt to remove nests when the birds are not breeding. When we do remove nests during nesting/breeding season, a bird rehabilitation specialist, Kathy Rogers of Rogers Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic takes the eggs and/or chicks to a sanctuary where she raises them to adulthood."

But all was not always rosy in Dallas. In March, White Rock quaker neighbor, Mari Anne Mourer, used her SUV to block the road to a TXU substation when a nest takedown was scheduled. She kept 17 trucks and 35 people out. Work was stopped, and a meeting was called the next week to discuss the alternative nesting sites and a plan that would not disturb the parrots during nesting season.

The utility erected a 40-foot tall pole with a platform as an alternative nesting site in the hope this platform, designed by engineers, environmentalists and the neighbors would remove the danger without hurting the birds. After a month though, the birds still preferred the transformers. They removed the nesting materials placed on the alternative site and carried them back to where their old nests had been removed.

Quaker Parakeet Society Vice President Zoe Howland noted she had been in touch with TXU spokesperson Liz Kirkpatrick who said they were unaware the platform was not high enough for the birds to find it more appealing than the power lines, but she would investigate that possibility.

A Little Give & Take

The Quaker Parakeet Society (QPS) would like to keep the birds safe, while being realistic about the situation. QPS President Brenda Piper commented, "We all have to understand that the power companies are removing quakers from transformers for very good reasons — safety, customer service and cost. The utilities are businesses that need to look out for their customers' well-being as well as the bottom line. When monk parakeets nest on power poles, they are in direct conflict with these business imperatives. The solution to this problem is working with the right people in the power companies to offer creative solutions, like the various alternative platforms, that will solve their problem.

“However,” Piper continued, “utilities listen to their customers. And it is through local community activists working together with the avian community that makes the real difference. In Texas, TXU is actively working with community leaders in the White Rock area to entice quakers to nest on the alternative platforms. It is too early in the process, though, to determine the success of the project. We would welcome this kind of open communication in other states where this problem also exists.”

According to well-known parrot behaviorist and author Mattie Sue Athan, co-author of *Parrots In The City: One Bird's Struggle For A Life On The Planet*, “Monks were the first (parrots) to become naturalized in the U.S., less than a century after humans displaced (some say killed) the parrots residing here when we arrived. I believe monks might also be the last parrots to survive on this planet. It is the only parrot that has learned to build a free-standing nest, thereby, liberating it from dependence on particular nesting habitat.”

Watching a companion quaker like Fonzie constantly build and rebuild the her nest-like creation of feathers, chopsticks and toys in the cage, gives a good view of what keeps the wild quaker going when humans take down its nest. As soon as the intruders are gone, the birds are back, flying with sticks much bigger than themselves, recreating their amazing quaker condos. There's a lot to be said for that kind of determination.