

Wild Parrots of Houston

An Invasive Species Opens Our Eyes to the Possibilities of the Houston Landscape

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FACE IT. HOUSTON IS UGLY. YOU KNOW YOU FEEL IT DEEP in your gut every time you return from some other city. Maybe your own neighborhood is a surprising island of loveliness, but the city as a whole? Vast stretches of infrastructure slice, dice, and gash the landscape to the point of ruin. Parking lots. Endless parking lots!

Beauty can be found, however, in the unlikelyst of places—high-voltage transmission towers. A species of parrots known as monk parakeets, or *Myiopsitta monachus*, builds chambered stick nests over six feet across in the crossbeams of the towers. Descended from birds in the temperate climes of Argentina and Bolivia, they dart in and out of the holes on the underside of their condominiums.

Go to the utility corridor that intersects Belaire Boulevard between Stella Link and the 610 Loop and you will find some of the oldest and largest colonies of monk parakeets. The corridor is truly Texas sized. Horses graze between the towers. The high-tension lines crackle as they deliver electricity across west Houston, which is alarming to be sure, though no studies have linked even long-term proximity to illness. On a single

line, you will see bright green parakeets perched next to grackles and doves. They suddenly break into flight as one flock—black, brown, and green gracefully arcing through the sky in unison. Other hotspots include the University of Houston main campus, El Franco Lee Park, and Highway 3 around Kemah.

“They eat bugs, berries, buds, flowers, nuts, and seeds depending on the life stage,” says Dan Brooks, Curator of Vertebrate Zoology at the Houston Museum of Natural Sciences. He adds, “The parakeets occupy a vacant niche that native species do not bother with.”

In June 2009, I posted a quick piece on OffCite about the wild parrots, featuring a quote from a *Chronicle* column by Lisa Gray and a map of sightings from ebird.org. Since then, several thousand people have visited the page, making it the most popular post since the launch of OffCite. The charisma of the wild parrots appears to be doing what the carefully researched articles I labored over for hours failed to achieve—draw enough attention to the landscape of our city that, instead of looking away, we find solutions to the fragmentation... *Find maps and other information at OffCite.org.*

“The nest of [monk parakeets] is unique among parrots. It is a large, bulky structure built from dry twigs and placed in the topmost branches of a tree. Preference is shown for thorny twigs, presumably because they bind together better and provide extra protection against predators. Nests with a single chamber and occupied by only one pair are not uncommon, but it is the enormous communal nests occupied by many pairs that are so conspicuous. These are probably formed over a number of years as pairs build their nests alongside or on top of existing nests. Each pair has its own chamber or compartment with an entrance tunnel, and there are no connections between compartments. Nests containing up to twenty compartments have been recorded, and Hudson says that some nests could weigh as much as 200 kilograms.”

PARROTS OF THE WORLD
Joseph M. Forshaw, 1977