

# They eat all our peanuts and can't even sing



By Bill Naylor

**Ring-necked parakeets are in the news again. Although they've been in the UK since the 1800s, and first bred here in 1969, over fifty years**

**ago, periodically a news item with dire warnings about invading parakeets is dusted off and broadcast. The prediction that they will compete with native birds for nesting holes has proved false. Parakeets nest earlier in the year than native birds and are less troublesome than say starlings that sometimes evict other birds' eggs from their tree cavity nests replacing them with their own. Greater spotted woodpeckers are even more lethal and prey on nestlings of tree cavity nesting birds like blue tits.**

The prejudice against parakeets is mainly because they're non-native. Non-native being automatically interpreted as invasive, which most non-natives are not. Little owls, brown hares, fallow deer and numerous non-native species enrich our landscape. The glorious sycamore that was felled by ignorant yobs, and sent the nation into national mourning, was a non-native species, and like the non-native Horse Chestnut, they're both extremely important, supporting large amounts of insects who are either food for native birds or like moths are plant pollinators.

Admittedly, like the parakeets, they didn't arrive in Britain before it broke away from the European land mass which meant they didn't qualify for a

'resident's permit', which I think is given too much importance. So, how did the parakeets get here? Aviary escapees who formed small groups and bred is the most likely way they gained a foothold. Parakeets were released from the 1951 Worton Hall, West London film set of the Humphrey Bogart film *African Queen*. But they were Quaker parakeets, and there are still colonies of Quaker Parakeets in Southern England.

Ringneck numbers globally increased in the 1970s. I remember a thriving colony in Osterley Park, West London, which as the parakeet flies is a few wing flaps from Heathrow. It's no coincidence the first feral Ring-necked parakeet colonies throughout Europe and the US were also close to airports, where many parrots were imported as part of the wildlife trade. Escapes of flocks of confiscated birds from airport holding pens was not unusual.

In the US, there are nearly sixty species of non-native parrots many who live in Florida near Miami International Airport. Ring-necked parakeets adapt easily to the UK climate, occurring naturally in mountain areas in Asia including the Himalayas. It was expected in the UK they would become an agricultural pest, but they live mainly in the suburbs and use bird feeders to supplement natural foods of flowers, blossoms, seeds, tree shoots and the numerous insects like caterpillars found in foliage. It's a myth they have no predators. Peregrine falcons, who hunt parakeets in Asia, where both species coexist, regularly prey on UK Ringnecks.

Anyone who believes the story that Ring-necks became established in London after Jimmi Hendrix released his pet parakeets in Carnaby Street, London, has been smoking too much Purple Haze.