

QUAKER PARRAKEET

{Myiopsitta monachus}

The Quaker is well known for two characteristics: its ability to colonise countries outside its native continent, and for the fact that it builds a large colonial nest of sticks. Sometimes called the Monk Parrakeet, its plumage is mainly grey and green, and its bill is brownish with a rounded appearance to the upper mandible. The cheeks and throat are grey, merging into the pale grey breast feathers which are tipped with white. Primary wing feathers are blue and black. In length it is about 29 cm (11 1/2 in) including the longish tail.

This parrakeet occurs naturally in south-eastern South America (Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia and Brazil). However, feral populations have become established in parts of the USA and in Europe. These are derived from escaped cage birds or those which have been deliberately released by a birdkeeper who enjoys watching several pairs at liberty on his property. They are so free-breeding that in some areas large populations have resulted after a few years.

They can be a menace to farmers because of their fondness for fruit and grain crops, otherwise it is a pleasure to watch them carrying sticks, building their nests and fledging their young. This unusual nest building habit arises from the fact that some areas of open Pampa, where they occur naturally, have no trees large enough to produce nesting holes.

In many areas, this is the most numerous and conspicuous member of the parrot family.

They can be offered a wide variety of seeds, fruits and vegetables, and also bread and milk and table scraps. Hand-reared birds make attractive pets and may learn to mimic. A colony aviary of Quakers is a never-ending source of interest, the only disadvantage being the continuous chattering and harsh calls which emerge from it.

At Loro Parque, in Tenerife, Quakers abound. They build their bulky nests in palm trees. A nest which fell from a palm onto my terrace contained six chambers, plus two sparrows' nests. There is no lining, and the eggs are laid on the carefully woven twigs. They commence to nest in March. Five or six eggs are laid, but three or four seem to be the usual number of young to emerge at the end of May.

Some pairs breed again and more young will be in evidence in September. Inevitably a number leave the nest prematurely and quickly find homes with the local people, who will hand-rear them as pets. First, however, they have to be bathed, for they are generally crawling with red mites. Young birds are easily distinguished by their shorter tails, whiter skin surrounding the eye, generally more docile appearance and bolder behaviour.

Quakers are ideal beginner's birds, being very easy to feed, hardy and willing to breed. In an aviary they will use a nest-box, or construct a stick nest if given a wire base and a large supply of sticks. Nest inspection is almost impossible because a short tunnel leads to the nest chamber.

There is a rare and expensive blue mutation and an even rarer, and more expensive, beautiful yellow mutation of the Quaker Parrakeet.