

The period between 1970, when rose-ringed parakeets began to appear in parts of London, until the mid-1980s, when the birds were officially recognized as ‘feral’, with free-ranging and self-sustaining populations, are in many ways the most interesting and the least documented. Dr Maan Barua is a geographer based at the University of Cambridge, and has been doing some research on cultural and historical aspects of parakeets in London.

Dr Barua is requesting images from parakeets from the time, and the anecdotes, encounters, and moments that accompany them. If you'd like to contribute to this project please email Dr Barua directly at maan.barua@geog.cam.ac.uk

In the article below, Dr Barua outlines the history of parakeets in London and puts his research in context.

Feral natures: cultural and historical geographies of parakeets in London

The Rose-ringed or Ring-necked parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) is amongst London’s most controversial birds, simultaneously sparking awe and apathy. Although ubiquitous today, the bird has a checkered and uneven history of inhabiting the city.

Parakeets bred in Epping Forest, north of Forest Gate as early as the 1930s. Whilst this is well documented, what is not very well known is that these birds became free-ranging because of deliberate releases following what was a global psittacosis outbreak (Anon., 1932). The Epping Forest birds soon died out, and the current London population dates back to 1969-1971, when breeding was reported from Croydon and a flock of about ten birds, that had escaped from a pet shop, began roosting in Runnymede (Self, 2014). In 1983, the British Ornithologists’ Union

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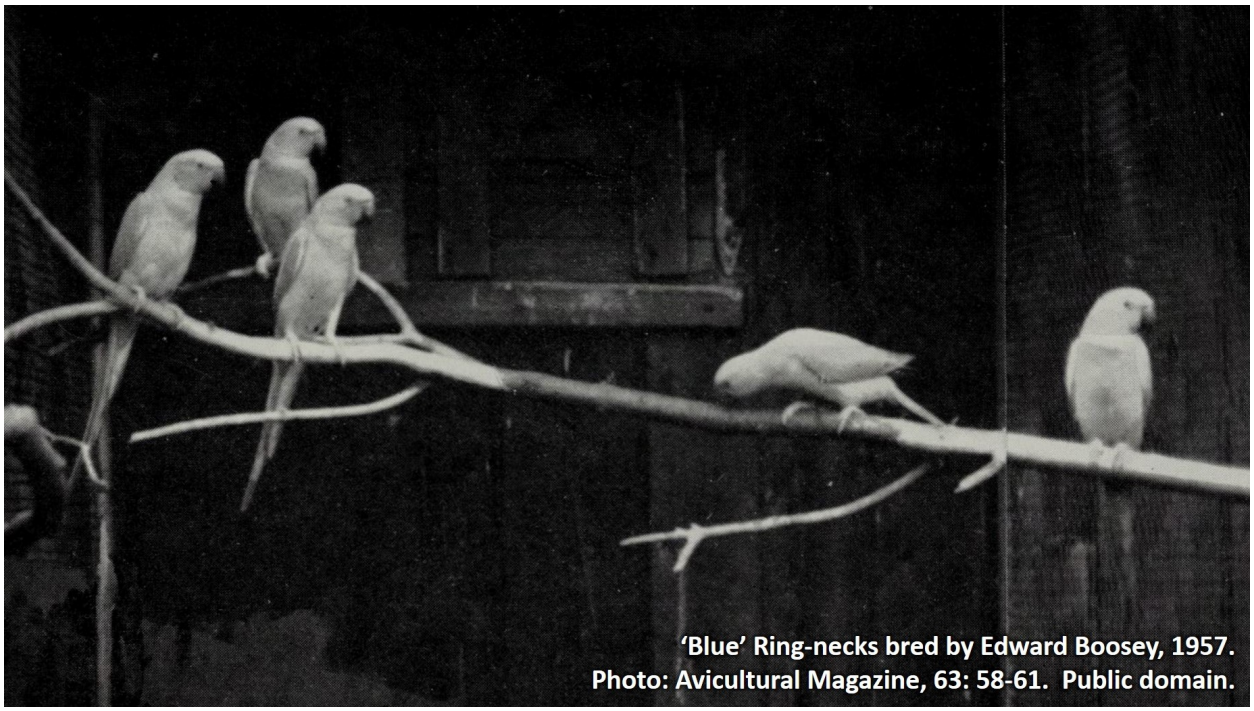
officially designated the birds to be ‘feral’ – i.e. their free-ranging populations were self-sustaining. When the first census of parakeets was conducted in 1986, the British population was purported to have grown to about a thousand birds. In thirty years, their numbers have increased seventeen-fold: there are approximately 8,600 breeding pairs in Britain, making the Rose-ring one of the most successful non-native birds on the island (Heald et al., 2019).

My ethnographic and archival research looks at how feral parakeets become a part of London’s metropolitan landscape, and the consequences this has for how people understand, and relate to, urban nature. In particular, I am interested in images of parakeets in the 1970s and 1980s, and what these convey in terms of a changing natural history of London. For instance, in 1976, when populations of parakeets were beginning to spread, a newspaper reported that ‘local residents rub their eyes in disbelief’ when parakeets turn up near their homes, ‘and put it all down to the hot weather’ (Anon., 1976). What were these moments of ‘disbelief’ like? And are there photographs that might tell us about these encounters, that, undoubtedly, would have been very strange for their times?

Furthermore, I am interested in trying to understand how parakeets were brought to Britain through networks of trade, and the economic networks that generated the grounds for ferality. Parakeets are, I would argue, commodities valued because of their status of being alive. This might sound trivial, but what I mean here is that what parakeets do as living, breathing creatures, and their aesthetic attributes, all add to, and enhance, their appeal. Equally – and here is the catch – these very living propensities allows parakeets to escape networks of trade and captivity and become feral.

My research on the histories of parakeets as living or ‘lively’ commodities has taken me to looking at a long tradition of trying to breed valued, ornamental colour morphs. Notable among these are the ‘blue’ and the yellow or ‘lutino’ mutations of Rose-rings. The former was famously bred by the Duke of Bedford, after he procured, with the help of Edward Boosey the president of the Avicultural Society, what were probably wild-caught ‘blue’ birds from Calcutta in the early part of the 20th century (Bedford, 1950). The pair, believed to be the only blue mutants held in captivity at the time, fetched an exorbitant sum of close to US$ 1,000 (West, 1954).

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After the end of the Second World War, new practices of bird-keeping emerged in Britain. In 1961, a newspaper report indicated that birds had become the most popular pet in Britain, outnumbering cats and dogs put together. The number of caged birds increased tenfold from six-hundred thousand in 1947 to six million in 1956. Although there was a ban on parakeet imports at the time, because of regulations governing psittacosis, this was lifted in the early 1970s. In the following thirty years, between the early 1970s and 2007, Britain imported nearly 26,000 parakeets, initially from India, and later from western Africa (Fletcher and Askew, 2007). The large volume of birds imported and, consequently, the frequent periods of escape, all contributed to the Rose-ringed parakeet becoming established as a feral denizen of the city.

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The story that unfolds thereafter is much better known. It was in the early 2000s that the surge of parakeet populations began. Numbers went up from 1,500 birds in London in 1996 (Pithon and Dytham, 1999), to 5,900 in 2000-2001 and nearly 10,000 birds by 2004 (Butler et al., 2013). Today, parakeets have become one of London's most common garden birds, and almost spread to every borough of the city. They provoke attention, and some people are accommodating of these verdant stranger, while others are not. Nonetheless, parakeets can hardly be ignored. 'They are,' as one of my informants tells me 'brash and gaudy, flauntingly foreign'. And, as another person says, 'Parakeets are as British as curry'. There is no settled view, and this is why ferality and feral ecologies, make for such a productive account for rethinking what constitutes urban nature.

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