



Ring-necked Parakeets in Fairview Park, Dublin, on February 4th, 2021. **Photo:** Niall T Keogh

Are parakeets becoming a problem?

Sightings of **Ring-necked Parakeets** are on the increase, and the species may be becoming established in the wild in Ireland... but are they a welcome novelty or a feral menace? **Ricky Whelan** and **Niall Keogh** investigate

The **Ring-necked Parakeet**, also known as the **Rose-ringed Parakeet**, is an attractive, medium-sized parrot with all-green plumage, a long tail and a red beak. The species gets its name from the black and rose-coloured ring around the neck of adult male birds (**see photo, below**). They are a social, charismatic and intelligent species, making them popular pets the world over.

In their native range across the Sahel region of Africa and the Indian subcontinent, Ring-necked Parakeets feed on a wide variety of plant foods, from buds and fruits to cereal grains and other seeds. In Europe, they also eat fruits such as apples, pears, cherries and the berries of hawthorn and other hedgerow trees and shrubs, and are frequently seen at garden feeders, gorging on peanuts and sunflower seeds.

In the wild in Britain, Ring-necked Parakeets nest in holes in trees, but do not excavate their own, relying on natural holes or those made by other species, such as woodpeckers. They can, however, enlarge a hole to suit.

In Britain, they are known to nest as early as January, and nesting continues well into the summer. Clutches are typically of 3-4 eggs; only the female incubates the eggs, though both parents feed the young.

The species has a wide feral distribution across Europe, the result of local introductions and escapes. It likely became established in Britain – and more recently in Ireland – through captive birds escaping.

Growing British population

Ring-necked Parakeets began breeding in Britain in 1969 (although records exist from as far back as 1855, when free-flying birds were recorded in Norfolk). The British population has grown dramatically, particularly in the **Greater London** area, and today large flocks are a familiar sight in public parks in London and other English cities.

The feral population in Greater London and Kent was deemed to be self-sustaining by 1983, and the species was added to 'Category C' of the British list – introduced species now established in the wild.

According to the latest *Bird Atlas* (2007-2011), some 30,000 individuals, including 8,600 breeding pairs, make up the British population of Ring-necked Parakeets. But more recent estimates from 2016 place the breeding figure at closer to 12,000 pairs.

The Greater London area and east Kent host the majority of these birds, though satellite populations have established footholds in Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle, Glasgow and other cities. Since 2017, Ring-necked Parakeets have been reported from as far north as Aberdeenshire and as far west as Devon.



An adult male Ring-necked Parakeet: note distinctive pink-and-black collar. **Photo:** Bernard Spragg

There are also records from the Isle of Man, though these are believed to be of local escapees, not pioneering parakeets on reconnaissance missions across the Irish Sea.

Ringing data from the BTO suggest that parakeets don't stray far from home – fourteen kilometres was considered to be a good movement by one ringed bird.

Slow geographical spread

Differences in the densities of the various UK subpopulations highlight some interesting quirks in the parrot's facility for colonising new areas. Their breeding success in Britain is often lower than in their native range, with Britain's cooler temperatures being cited as a factor contributing to egg infertility. On the other hand, parakeets in Britain appear to benefit from lower levels of predation.

They also benefit from garden feeders and from being hand-fed by visitors to public parks, such as Hyde Park in London. Their ability to take advantage of such feeding opportunities, together with their relatively limited losses to predation (including some to urban-nesting Peregrines), has allowed the overall population to boom, especially in the last twenty-five years.

And yet range expansion has been slow. Numbers tend to increase locally, with few birds striking off to settle new areas. One study in London found that while numbers increased at an annual rate of 30%, the rate of geographical spread was only 0.4km per year.

These attributes have meant that, in the UK at least, their distribution is still largely confined

to cities, particularly to suburbs and other areas with large parks, where providing feed for birds is a popular activity.

Do they affect native species?

With numbers growing in Britain, concern is mounting over the impact that parakeets could be having on native species, and there is a tendency to label the species as invasive.

Being a cavity-nesting species, the oft-cited worry is that this parakeet might outcompete native hole-nesting species such as the UK's three **woodpecker** species, as well as **Nuthatch**, **Stock Dove** and **Starling**.

There isn't a lot of evidence for this impact so far, but aggressive behaviour by parakeets towards native birds has been observed around tree holes, so it is easy to imagine how competition could favour the often-larger parakeet, which also nests early in the season and takes up nest sites before many native species do so.

Research from other countries with feral parakeet populations reveals the detrimental effects they can have. In Belgium, **Nuthatch** numbers were lower in areas where parakeets bred. In Spain, parakeets were found to be evicting roosting **Greater Noctule Bats** from tree cavities and, over four years, as parakeet nests increased by a whopping 96%, bat numbers at the study sites fell by 70%.

It should be noted that these apparent impacts on native wildlife were documented in urban areas where parakeets do well. It is not yet known if the same applies to areas beyond their urban and suburban strongholds.

The situation in Ireland

It is unclear how many Ring-necked Parakeets exist in the wild in Ireland, but records go back as far as 1998, when they were noted in Cork, with later reports coming from Wexford, Wicklow, Dublin, Meath and Antrim.

Up until now, the infrequent records of this species were treated casually by birders, but with more being reported to the **National Biodiversity Data Centre** and via BirdWatch Ireland's **Irish Garden Bird Survey**, it is time to keep a watching brief on this species.

Following a recent call for records, a small population of Ring-necked Parakeets was identified around **Drumcondra** in Dublin. Reports noted parakeets frequenting gardens and feeding at bird feeders. Birds were also observed roosting in mature trees in nearby parks, including **Fairview Park**, and prospecting suitable nest holes.

The species is listed by the National Biodiversity Data Centre as an "invasive species with risk of high impact." It is also listed amongst the top 100 invasive species by the DAISIE inventory of alien invasive species in Europe.



Ring-necked Parakeet. **Photo:** Dick Daniels

Feral Ring-necked Parakeet populations have the potential, however slight, to affect Ireland's agriculture, and any such impact would be treated seriously. With the UK's experience for us to learn from, and the likely boost to parakeets from rising temperatures as the planet heats up, we need to keep a close eye on the population here in Ireland.

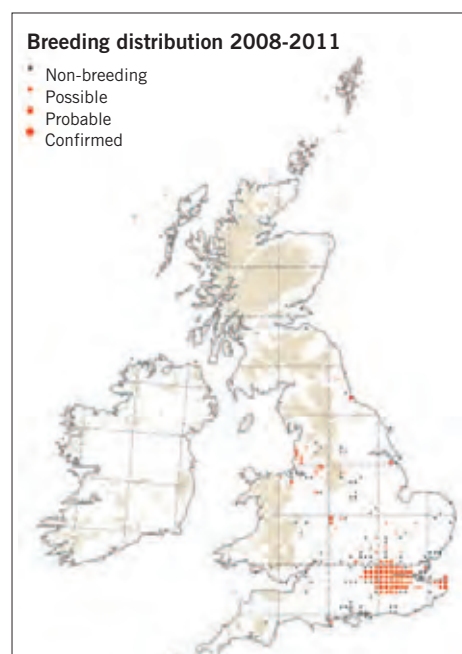
With only a small number currently living in the wild here, all could be captured and returned to captivity, an approach that would satisfy conservationists, animal rights groups and the public alike.

Report your Ring-necked Parakeet sightings

➡ If you observe Ring-necked Parakeets living free in the wild, please report your sighting to the National Biodiversity Data Centre's Invasive Species portal at www.bit.ly/parakeet-sighting ■



Ring-necked Parakeet in north Dublin garden on February 28th, 2020. **Photo:** Catherine Bushe



Breeding distribution of the Ring-necked Parakeet as recorded in Bird Atlas 2007-2011 **Map:** Courtesy of BTO