

The Carolina Parakeet in Mississippi: An Historical Review

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The history of the Carolina Parakeet (Conuropsis carolinensis) in Mississippi is a sketchy one. It seems desirable, however, to put on record what I have been able to find out in a 25-year study, about that extinct species.

The difficulties of assigning Mississippi River records to a particular state will be evident. I have tried to avoid obvious duplication, so that some references pertinent to the state of Mississippi must be examined in parakeet accounts of Arkansas and Louisiana (not yet published).

The great ornithologist Alexander Wilson in May 1810 saw parakeets on "Bayo San Pierre" (that is, Bayou Pierre), a stream that empties into the Mississippi in Claiborne County. However, he was presumably on the Natchez Trace at the time and therefore he would have crossed Bayou Pierre well to the east of the Mississippi River, although probably still within the bounds of Claiborne County. We also learn from him that parakeets were present in considerable numbers in the vicinity of the river valley city of Natchez. One lady (the word is Wilson's) there had, with results that were dubious to Wilson's strict turn of mind, attempted to test the old belief that the guts of parakeets were poisonous to cats. In Adams County, just south of Natchez, in late May, while enjoying the hospitality of the famous Scottish-born scientist and pioneer, Sir William Dunbar, Wilson procured a cage for his docile pet, a crippled Carolina parakeet that he had brought overland from the Ohio Valley in Kentucky. He placed the caged bird "under the piazza, where by its call it soon attracted the passing flocks, such is the attachment they have for each other. Numerous parties frequently alighted on the trees immediately above" (Wilson, 1811:91, 93, 96-97).

Samuel R. Brown, guide-book author of the Western Gazetteer, intent on making the South a tropical paradise, claimed that as you journeyed down the Mississippi and reached the mouth of Bayou Pierre (cited above), "The traveller here finds himself in the proper region of the paroquets--indeed the woods appear alive with birds of various sorts" (1817:233). The claim, I suspect, may well be a misreading of Wilson's reference to Bayou Pierre. Another compiler, David B. Warden (1819, 3:10), took Brown much too literally and noted flatly that "Parroquets are seen as high as the Bayou Pierre stream of the Mississippi."

John J. Audubon's references to parakeets on the Mississippi in the latitude of Arkansas will be discussed in the account of that state to be published elsewhere. His records for 17, 19, and 20 December 1820 are only by courtesy placed on the Arkansas side, for it is not clear which side of the river he was on. On 23 December they passed the mouth of the Yazoo, and

a couple days later were visiting the markets in Natchez, on the alert for new birds -- not as unlikely a spot as might be imagined, for Audubon found many small birds, including swallows, on sale in the food markets. But, in contrast to their abundance higher up, there seem to have been no parakeets (Audubon, 1929:85, 87).

Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Württemberg, on 13 April 1823, noted birds seen from the steamboat upon which he ascended the Mississippi. Above the mouth of the Yazoo (and therefore probably Issaquena County, opposite Madison Parish), he saw such birds as herons, ducks, kingfishers, eagles, and fish crows; and, he added, "Flocks of screaming parrots flew noisily across the Mississippi" (1941:160).

A. H. Wright (1912:359) placed a sight record of the parakeet in winter 1833 as "above Rodney," Jefferson County. I think it was much closer to the mouth of the Arkansas River than Rodney and have included it in my Arkansas account, even though I do not know which side of the river Carl David Arfwedson was on (1834, 2:96).

It is obvious that landscapes have their conventions: some travelers found parakeets in the American wilderness, while others denied their presence. Anyone matured under the conviction that real civilization and true grandeur are found only in old Europe is apt to turn bitterly reflective when faced with primeval scenery. Besides, when the French Traveler, Abbe Emmanuel H.D. Domenech, journeyed by steamboat up the Mississippi River in late May or early June 1846, parakeets may already have been uncommon there. Perhaps, in his denunciatory mood, he would not have seen parakeets, even if they had been present: "...the...silence of these deep solitudes...is only broken by...the monotonous chant of the man heaving the lead. But...these wilds, old as the world itself, disdainfully refuse to send back any echo. No chattering of monkeys here, no chirping of birds; for, let travellers say what they please, the United States possess neither parrots nor monkeys, except in cages; and, indeed, singing birds are rare even in the primaeval forests" (1858:6).

James Adair, an astute Indian trader and wilderness diplomat, mentioned parakeets in his "Account of the Chikkasah Nation," which must refer mainly to northeastern Mississippi. The period referred to was about 1740-1760. In the black soil there, trees flourished. Low, wet lands had cypress, beech, maple, holly, cottonwood, black mulberry, and many other species of trees. The black mulberry, he wrote "is plenty. It is high, and if it had proper air and sun-shine, the boughs would be very spreading. On the fruit, the bears and wild fowl feed during their season, and also swarms of paroquets" (1930:386, 387).

It is instructive to note that much the same country that Adair referred to was crossed by Alexander Wilson as he rode alone (except for his parakeet, "Poll,") along the famous Natchez Trace from Nashville to Natchez, 4 to 18 May 1810. It is quite clear from the detailed account of his quest that parakeets were not common in the region of northern and

central Mississippi, at that particular season, at least. Wilson traveled on horseback the entire distance from the northeastern corner of the state to the Mississippi River, carrying with him his valuable pet, the most perfect lure possible to entice wild parakeets into his view, but had not a sign of them.

Several isolated and usually unspecific references complete the account of the parakeet in Mississippi. Traugott Bromme, a German traveler and geographer of some experience (but with how much personal knowledge of Mississippi is not known) wrote in 1837 (1942:11) that "Parrots and kolibries are native in this state" (the second term means hummingbirds); but his bird list was not very exhaustive and may have been copied.

Prof. Benjamin L.C. Wailes, in an oft-quoted reference, wrote in 1854 that "The Paroquet or Carolina Parrot...was formerly very numerous, and often resorted in large flocks to inhabited districts, and made himself familiar with the apple orchards. Now the Paroquet has become quite scarce and shy, and is seldom seen in flocks of more than half a dozen together..." (1854:319, 324). I suspect that this rather literary generalization was not a personal observation at all and that it ought to be cited with great caution as a substantive report.

Lewis Harper (= Ludwig Hafner), who succeeded Wailes on the State Geological Survey in Mississippi, wrote in his "Preliminary report on the geology and agriculture of the state of Mississippi" (1857:196, 309) that parakeets and other birds joined many mammals in eating the soil at 'licks' (in this case, apparently mineral, not salt, licks). This may be a reliable report. The area specifically referred to is the more inland parts of De Soto County, in extreme northwestern Mississippi, Coldwater River and Horn Lake being particularly mentioned.

Although Oliver P. Hay saw no parakeets during his field work in the lower Mississippi Valley in the summer of 1881, "A gentleman in Jackson [Mississippi] stated that he had, within a year or two, seen a flock of Parakeets pass over that city" (1882:93). This is the only reference to the species in that area of the state, and a late one at that.

A note in files of the old Bureau of Biological Survey (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Laurel, Maryland) notes that Major G.V. Young (who submitted migration records from 1884 to 1886) of Waverly, Clay County, had reported: "Parakeet, Winter." This is certainly an interesting record, coming from the east-central part of the state as it does.

A history of Mississippi (Anon. 1891:25) listed the Carolina Parrot among interesting residents. The list is not as wild as one often meets in early accounts; 89 species were named in the bird list. The passenger pigeon was considered at some length and was rather conservatively said to be only a visitor by then.

Hasbrouck (1891:376) was clearly incorrect to cite Beckham (1887) as giving a Mississippi record, for the reference is to Bayou Sara, Louisiana.

A mounted adult parakeet (North Museum, Lancaster, Pa.) has been listed as having come from Mississippi (Hahn 1963:316). However, investigation reveals that it was an ornament on a hat (a whole bird!) that had been bought in Natchez "some time before 1850." This hardly proves it a definitive Mississippi record. An adult specimen in the Narodni Museum Zoologicke Oddeleni, Prague, Czechoslovakia, is said to be from "Mississippi," from the "Collectio Nickerl" (Hahn 1963:296); but I am unable to get further information and am at present skeptical of the record.

In summary, the history of the Carolina Parakeet in Mississippi lacks any references to the species from really early travelers (I have tried to check out all available travel accounts). However, its presence in the first quarter of the 19th century, at least, particularly in the Mississippi valley is attested to by Wilson, Audubon, and the thoroughly reliable Duke Paul Wilhelm. There are possible sight records down to about 1880, mostly of a vague nature. At present, there seem to be no certifiable specimens from the state.

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