

## Carolina Parakeet

The Carolina parakeet is an extinct species of small green neotropical parrot with a bright yellow head, reddish orange face and pale beak that was native to the eastern, midwestern and plains states of the United States. It was the only indigenous parrot within its range, as well as one of only three parrot species native to the United States. The Carolina parakeet was found from southern New York and Wisconsin to Kentucky, Tennessee and the Gulf of Mexico, from the Atlantic seaboard to as far west as eastern Colorado. It lived in old-growth forests along rivers and in swamps. It was called Puzzi la Née ("head of yellow") or Pot Pizza Chee by the Seminole and Kelinky in Chickasaw. Though formerly common within its range, the bird had become rare by the middle of the 19th century. The last confirmed sighting in the wild was of the Ludovicianus subspecies in 1910. The last known specimen perished in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1918 and the species was declared extinct in 1939.

The earliest reference to these parrots was in 1583 in Florida reported by Sir George Peckham in A True Report of the Late Discoveries of the Newfound Lands of Expeditions conducted by English explorer Sir Humphrey Gilbert. Carolina parakeets were probably poisonous—American naturalist and painter John J. Audubon noted that cats apparently died from eating them. Carolina parakeets are known to eat the toxic seeds of cockleburs.

Male and female adults were identical in plumage; however, males were slightly larger than females. These birds weighed about 3.5 oz., were 13 in. long, and had wingspans of 21–23 in. The bird lived in huge, noisy flocks of as many as 200–300 birds. It built its nest in a hollow tree, laying two to five (most accounts say two) 1.6 in (4.1 cm) round white eggs.

It ate mostly the seeds of forest trees and shrubs including those of cypress, hackberry, beech, sycamore, elm, pine, maple, oak, and other plants such as thistles and sandspurs (*Cenchrus* species). It also ate fruits, including apples, grapes and figs. It was especially noted for its predilection for cockleburs, a plant which contains a toxic glucoside, and it was considered to be an agricultural pest of grain crops.

The last captive Carolina parakeet, Incas, died at the Cincinnati Zoo on February 21, 1918. The evidence is indicative that humans had at least a contributory role in the extinction of the Carolina parakeet, through a variety of means. Chief was deforestation in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hunting played a significant role, both for decorative use of their colorful feathers, for example, adornment of women's hats, and for reduction of crop predation. This was partially offset by the recognition of their value in controlling invasive cockleburs. Minor roles were played by capture for the pet trade and, as noted in *Pacific Standard*, by the introduction for crop pollination of European honeybees that competed for nest sites. A factor that exacerbated their decline to extinction was the flocking behavior that led them to return to the vicinity of dead and dying birds (e.g., birds downed by hunting), enabling wholesale slaughter.

The final extinction of the species in the early years of the 20th century is somewhat of a mystery, as it happened so rapidly. Vigorous flocks with many juveniles and reproducing pairs were noted as late as 1896. Despite being long-lived in captivity, they had virtually disappeared by 1904.