

LIFESTYLE

## Are L.A.'s parrots getting louder? We investigate



Parrots gather in a roost in Temple City, where their loudness can be overwhelming. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

BY ADAM TSCHORN | SENIOR FEATURES WRITER

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That the parrots of Los Angeles are loud is an indisputable fact. The voluble squawks, warbles and trills of the colorful non-native birds (descendants of those originally imported from Mexico as pets that were freed or escaped) have been part of the SoCal soundtrack for more than half a century.

The volume of their vocalization has been chronicled in the pages of *The Times* as far back as the early 1960s, and it's the rare account of the feathered fauna that doesn't mention the cacophony that accompanies a pandemonium of parrots (yes, that's the appropriate collective noun for a group of them). But if you've been treated to an earful from a local treeful lately, particularly in the last month or so, you might have wondered: Have L.A.'s parrots gotten louder? And if they have pumped up the volume, why?

To get a bead on just what kind of volume level we're talking about, I joined a recent field trip to the Temple City roost — the nightly home to one of the largest flocks of the mouthy birds around — organized by the [Pasadena Audubon Society](#). (Temple City is located in the west San Gabriel Valley, about five miles southeast of Pasadena.)



Parakeets sit in a tree in Temple City. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)



Shortly after 4 p.m., the first groups of four or five birds at a time (mitred parakeets at first) flapped into view, alighting in the spindly sycamore trees in the Rosemead Boulevard median near Olive Street, their calls barely audible against the thrum of rush hour traffic.

About a half-hour later, the volume had risen markedly, and the groups were noticeably larger — six and eight bright green birds at a time (red-crowned parrots, red-masked parakeets and at least one yellow-headed parrot swooping in to join the dozen or two parrots already perched in each tree).



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At 4:45 p.m., the median birds took wing en masse, circling in the sky a few times before taking up residence in a denser stand of trees a couple of hundred feet farther away along Eaton Wash and behind a Korean restaurant, cranking up the volume knob another few notches along the way. Noisy? Sure. Loud? Yes, but hardly distractingly so.

Then, at about 5 p.m., just as the sun was setting, things seemed to go all Hitchcock movie on us as hundreds and hundreds of flapping, squawking, chirping and tweeting parrots (and a good number of parakeets) converged on the trees surrounding the intersection and accomplished the rare feat of drowning out — for a good 10 minutes — the sound of all the automobiles driving by just a few feet in front of us.



And, yes, they were loud. Ear-piercingly loud. Two hundred pet shops, a dozen zoos and a good-sized rainforest all mixed together and turned up to 11 loud.

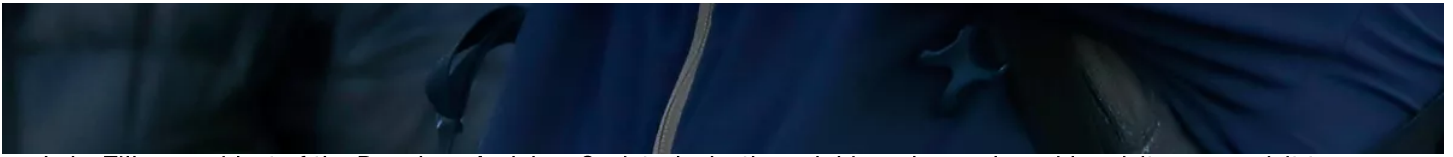
A few days later, Pasadena Audubon Society board member and field trip chair Corey Husic sent a final tally: a total of 1,323 individual birds had been spotted, a number that included 1,000 red-crowned parrots, 180 mitred parakeets, 20 lilac-crowned parrots, 25 red-masked parakeets, four each of red-lored parrots and yellow-headed parrots, and a random assortment of less flashy feathered creatures including American crows (3), common ravens (2) and a single Cooper's hawk.

Loudness confirmed, I turned to the leaders of the excursion — Husic and PAS president Luke Tiller — to find out if the birds had somehow gotten their beaks on the volume knob. While they had sound suggestions as to why the resident parrot population might seem louder now to the average Angeleno (or Temple Citian, in this particular instance), Husic suggested I reach out to John McCormack, director of the



[Moore Laboratory of Zoology](#) at Occidental College and a lead investigator of the school's [Free-Flying Los Angeles Parrot Project](#).

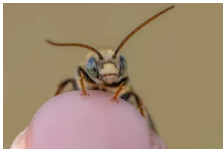




Luke Tiller, president of the Pasadena Audubon Society, looks through binoculars as he guides visitors on a visit to Temple City to see a roost of parrots and parakeets who make the area their nightly home. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

“They’ve definitely been increasing in numbers over the last 15 years,” McCormack said. “So what started as small, local populations has sort of expanded across the city, as well as individual flocks becoming bigger. So that’s one reason for the increased noise.

“It used to just be that the Temple City flock was kind of the main flock around for the [*Amazona* genus] parrots. And that was their epicenter, and you didn’t find them anywhere else,” he explained. “And in addition to that one growing in numbers, there’s also all these satellite flocks.” McCormack described recently tracking down a flock of 100 yellow-headed parrots in Altadena, which is about seven miles northwest of Temple City.



LIFESTYLE

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“The yellow-headed were actually kind of the original OG parrot in L.A. back in the 1960s, and they were thought to be declining,” McCormack said. “But they seemed to be doing pretty well out in Altadena.”

In addition to the more parrots in more places equals more noise explanation (an hourlong instead of decades-long version of which I watched unfold in Temple City as the birds gathered together to roost for the night), there are several other reasons why people might perceive the birds to be a bit louder — especially right now.



## It's peak flocking season

McCormack explained that the parrot breeding cycle has the birds going off in (much less noisy) pairs in the spring. “Right about now is when they start breaking off and searching for nesting locations,” he said, adding that they’ll reform into larger (and noiser) flocks again beginning in August and September.

“Right now,” he said when I spoke to him in mid-January, “is sort of peak flocking.” (McCormack also noted that parrot vocalization has its daily cycles as well as seasonal ones. In addition to the evening come-home-to-roost socializing I’d observed just before sunset, there’s increased morning-time chatter. “We’ve got flocks that come in here, right by Occidental College where I live. And they’re always making a lot of noise in the morning as they’re waking up,” McCormack said.



A large flock of parrots takes off through the dusky sky in Temple City. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

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## You've got new neighbors

During the visit to the Temple City roost, PAS' Husic offered a simple explanation as to why the parrots might seem louder to some people. They might have recently decided to alight in your 'hood. "The roosts tend to move around a little bit," he explained. "In previous years, this particular one has been centered a few blocks northeast, up near Workman Avenue. There still seem to be some over there too, but the bulk has shifted [here]."

The result? Anyone living within earshot of a fresh roost site could be forgiven for thinking a full-scale parrot-geddon was in full swing every night of winter.

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Some species are louder (and more grating) than others

Pointing to the first few birds spotted during the Temple City field trip — a pair of mitred parakeets alighting in a sycamore tree — Husic suggested another explanation for a perceived noise increase. "The parakeet has a higher-pitched call that can be more grating," he said. "So maybe people are picking up on that." He also singled out the yellow-headed parrot as a possible culprit, describing its call as "sometimes sound[ing] like a shrieking child." In large enough numbers, that can be hard to tune out.



Two red-masked parakeets interact with each other while perched in the branches of a tree in Temple City. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)



“Those are really loud,” McCormack said. “Really loud and really grating. ... They’re every bit as shrieky as the red-crowned parrot, but with an added staccato burst, that makes it extra grating. If you’ve got a flock of a hundred right by your apartment complex, which they were in Altadena — they were literally roosting right next to a bunch of apartments — that’s going to be insane.”

McCormack’s comment made me think back to the field trip and the Kahlua Apartments complex strung along Rosemead and facing the spindly parrot-filled sycamores in the median. Noticing the cluster of apartments, one of my fellow birdwatchers asked exactly what I’d been thinking: “Does the parrot noise bother people?” she asked over the din of parrot socializing.

Tiller gave a slight shrug. “This is L.A.,” he answered.



TRAVEL & EXPERIENCES

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Yes, the sounds generated by the free-flying parrots of Greater Los Angeles — with their green plumage flecked with shades of yellow, red and lilac — are as much a part of the city’s soundscape as the rustle of wind through the [palm trees](#) (all but one species of which are also non-native, by the way) and the soft, almost pneumatic whoosh of freeway traffic.

And now if you notice that crazy-colored ornithological orchestra getting louder, you’ll know there’s substance behind the squawk.



Adam Tschorn

Senior features writer Adam Tschorn writes about a range of style-centric pop-culture topics for the Los Angeles Times. Holding a B.A. in philosophy and an M.A. in journalism makes him well-qualified to look at something and ask: “Why?”