

# BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Rumors fly around the wild parrots of Pasadena

BY VIVIEN MEJIA

**R**ivaling J. Robert Oppenheimer as the most famous Pasadena resident these days is the red-crowned Amazon parrot, along with its half-brother, the lilac-crowned Amazon, and cousins, the yellow-chevroned and red-masked parakeets, plus half a dozen other *psittacines*.

These flocks—or more aptly named “pandemoniums”—of jewel-hued and raucous birds, native to Central and South America, have been nesting in the wilds of Pasadena for over half a century. Although their origin story is murkier than your average Marvel superhero, the gist is always the same: People’s fascination with these brilliantly painted and some say brilliantly intelligent birds led to a rush of legal and mostly illegal smuggling in the exotic pet trade from south of the border in the 1960s and ’70s. How they got from the cage to the backyard kumquat tree remains a mystery, but their numbers are growing and so is their popularity as wild transplants.

John Jackson, Pasadena resident and owner of Wild Parrot Brewing Company, was so captivated by the birds, especially

the symphony of squawks, chirps, and screeches they make, that he named his business after them.

“You can hear them coming before you see them,” he says. “I describe it to out-of-towners as a mash-up between robotic dinosaurs and tropical bird calls. It felt like a perfect name for something that would feel really specific and local to Pasadena.”

Indeed, the birds seem to be in a constant state of partying and their moveable and noisy feasts would be any pub owner’s wildest dream for a bustling business (for beer-drinking humans, of course). Johnson, who opened his doors in fall 2022, says the response has been fantastic. Locals, for the most part, love the quirky birds and tourists can’t get enough of them. His parrot merch has been moving quickly, especially the comic book animation-styled stickers.

Jackson says he’s “98% sure” the original source of the parrots and why they seem so plentiful in the Pasadena area is the Simpson’s Garden Town pet emporium fire of 1959. The store, then located on Colorado Boulevard, kept



**WHAT'S IN STORE**

How flocks of parrots populated Pasadena remains a mystery, but some trace their provenance to the Simpson’s Garden Town pet emporium fire of 1959.





SIGN: WILD PARROT BREWING COMPANY; POSTCARD: EBAY.COM; BIRD: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO; FLOCK: CAROLYN COLE/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

live parrots and lore has it that kind firefighters or employees released the birds rather than have them perish. Jackson recalls a young man sitting at his bar not more than a year ago, explaining that his grandfather was “the Hal Simpson,” owner and namesake of the emporium, and that the story was, in fact, true. Granted, like all good folk legends, Jackson didn’t get a chance to get the man’s name or contact info before he left the bar.

Ironically enough, the parrots were able to survive and thrive by feasting on mostly exotic plants, trees and citrus also introduced by humans to the San Gabriel Valley. Completely by default, non-native loquats, figs, apricots, silk floss trees and citrus provided the parrots with the exact diet they’d had in their countries of origin. Consequently, the parrots, although technically alien species to Southern California, have not for the most part become competitive with native birds over food, as has happened with escaped parrot populations in other parts of the world. Additionally, while the vast amounts of oaks and sycamores in the area give the parrots plenty of roosting space, they still provide ample room for other birds and animals in the uniquely

urban/suburban landscape we call home.

“I love the parrots,” says Luke Tiller, wildlife biologist and president of the Pasadena Audubon Society. “If you look for them, they come to these huge communal roosts between say September through March, when the roosts are at their most impressive, and it’s one of the most amazing wildlife spectacles you’ll see anywhere, particularly in a city.”

In fact, the society offers guided tours to these roosting areas and they’re typically attended by ever-increasing flocks of parrot and bird enthusiasts. Tiller also explained how many of the parrot species seen flourishing in Pasadena are actually facing daunting odds and even extinction in their countries of origin.

“The red-crowned parrot, which is the most common in Southern California, is originally from northeastern Mexico, where it has been listed by the

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—JOHN JACKSON  
Wild Parrot Brewing  
Company

IUCN [International Union for Conservation of Nature] as endangered,” he says. It’s hard to believe, but there are now more of these *Amazona viridigenalis* in our neighborhood than in any jungle in the world.

Numbering in the thousands, the birds are being tracked through Free-Flying Los Angeles Parrot Project, or FLAPP, part of Occidental College’s Moore Laboratory of Zoology. Any willing resident can partic-

ipate through the iNaturalist website. The project is trying to pin down DNA profiles of the parrots in SoCal in hopes of establishing a kind of reservoir for endangered populations throughout Latin America. An accidental beginning in California may now prove to be these birds’ last chance of success back home.

Although “home” is a relative term. Certainly, they’ve made our city their home for at least five decades and in doing have become a symbol for our identity: eccentric, colorful, brilliant and resourceful. A match made in heaven—or should we say, Pasadena. 📍