

# Tropical island problem: Too many parrots

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In this photo taken Saturday, March 3, 2012, an Indian ring-necked parakeet sits on a bamboo branch in Le Jardin du Roi Spice Garden near Anse Royale on the island of Mahe in the Seychelles. The eradication of the Indian ring-necked parakeet is the goal so that a Seychelles' national bird, the black parrot, may live, those carrying out the EU-funded project say. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

(AP) — The green parrots that live on the tropical paradise of Seychelles fly into the bamboo stalks next to Micheleine Georges' 150-year-old farmhouse at dusk. The birds are small and cute. They are also marked for death.

The eradication of the Indian ring-necked parakeet is the goal so that a Seychelles' national bird — the black parrot — may live, those carrying out the EU-funded project say. The black parrot could be wiped out by a disease that the Indian ring-necked parrot carries.

At 6:20 p.m., small packs of green [parrots](#) began flying up the valley to

the bamboo patch beside Georges' house. Gliding in under a bright crescent moon in small groups of three, five or 10 birds, they whoosh into the bamboo, not far from the vanilla, cinnamon and nutmeg that Georges sells to tourists.

An animal-lover, Georges has mixed feelings about the kill mission. She says it would be a "calamity" if the parakeets wiped out the nation's black parrots, but otherwise she enjoys watching them fly in to roost for the night.

"They seem to be a part of the evening routine. You finish work, you have a beer on the deck and you see the droves of birds coming up to the trees," she said.

The Indian ring-necked parakeet first appeared in the Seychelles in the 1970s, perhaps when a caged pet escaped or was set free, said Peter Haverson, a Briton with a novel job title: avian eradication specialist.

The population turned viable in the mid-1980s and by the 1990s it was recognized as a threat. In 2000, when Haverson guesses that the population was only a couple dozen strong, the island began an awareness campaign against the birds.

Though graceful and good-looking, the green parakeets have earned the designation of pest. They eat from residential fruit trees and commercial crops. Perhaps of greater concern to Seychelles, they could kill off the nation's black parrots by introducing beak and feather disease, a fatal affliction for the black parrot.

The two species don't yet intermingle. The green parrots are only found on the country's main island, Mahe, while the black parrots live on Praslin, 25 miles (40 kilometers) to the northeast. That's likely too far to fly, but biologists fear the green parrots could hop on a ferry and land in

Praslin.

The Seychelles Islands Foundation eradication project estimates that the island nation now has 230 of the parakeets, a number that would rise to 3,000 birds in a decade if the birds are allowed to live. The parakeets can grow to 16 inches (40 centimeters), twice as big as the budgerigar parakeet, the common house pet, which grows to about 7 inches (18 centimeters).

The Seychelles is a chain of 115 breathtakingly beautiful islands far out in East Africa's Indian Ocean. That isolation creates unique mini ecosystems, but it can also place the black parrot in peril.

"They tend to be more vulnerable to diseases because they've been brought up in an environment where they're not open to global threats of other diseases," said Haverson. "They're very secure here, but now you have an alien invader coming in which has this disease which could devastate it."

Other countries — Britain, Australia, even parts of the U.S. — are also seeking to control their green parrot populations, he said, but the Seychelles project is the first attempt to eradicate the bird from an ecosystem. The Indian ring-necked parakeet is native to 35 countries and has been introduced to another 39. Its growth is a consequence of the global travel patterns of humans. Invasive species are recognized by the convention on biodiversity as a major threat to ecosystems, especially island ecosystems.

"Because Seychelles is such a small island it's an achievable program here," Haverson said.

Georges — the 75-year-old caretaker of Le Jardin du Roi, or the Garden of the King — is skeptical the project will succeed in killing all the

birds.

"How are they going to do it? How?" she says.

So far the project has only carried out a count of the green parakeet. Nets and guns are being brought in. Hand-in-hand with the eradication campaign is an educational campaign designed to lessen the outcry for killing of the birds.

"These parrots aren't part of their natural heritage," said Nancy Bunbury, who works with the Seychelles Islands Foundation. "If we can get that message through them they (Seychelles residents) are more accepting of the fact that you want to do something about it."

The foundation received official notification last month that it can carry out the project, Bunbury said. Eradication is likely to begin in November or December. The program, which has the backing of the Seychelles Ministry of Environment and Energy, is one of several the foundation is carrying out thanks to a \$960,000 grant from the EU.

Bunbury and Haverson argue that the damage the green parakeets could have on the Seychelles is higher than in other regions because of the Seychelles' small size and extreme isolation. Seychelles must import much of what it consumes, so if the little agriculture the islands do carry out is ruined, it could have outsized financial consequences, they say.

The project will place nets around the roosting site next to Georges' wooden farmhouse. Any birds that evade the nets will be targeted through guns with silencers.

As the green parakeets swooshed into her green bamboo stalks on a recent evening, Georges sat on a wooden bench, looked down her lush green valley and out onto a moonlit Indian Ocean.

"Definitely the black parrot has priority over the little green ones, but still it would be a shame to eradicate them," she said as the day's light faded.

"You sit here. The moon and the birds come in. It's a wonderful, wonderful feeling at the day's end."

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