

Scientists discover how to beat monk parakeets at their own game

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In a study published this week in the online journal *PeerJ*, University of Connecticut researchers announce they have found a way to prevent Monk Parakeets (*Myiopsitta monachus*), an invasive species of parrot, from building huge nests that create power outages and public hazards on utility poles by blocking their access to the electric lines that are the gateway to their nest sites.

The nests, which are built out of sticks and twigs, can weigh up to 200 pounds or more. The damage they cause can cost electric utility companies millions of dollars annually.

But, the brightly colored [birds](#) may have finally met their match. "Block their route along the lines, and you'll keep them from building nests in the first place," says the study's lead author Kevin Burgio, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (EEB) at the University of Connecticut.

Burgio and his co-authors studied the birds in order to find out if there was a way to block nest building activity on utility poles before it got started. They watched birds from the beginning of the nest-building process, and discovered that the parakeets carry sticks to the nest site by landing on the lines, and then walking to the spot where the line meets the pole, instead of flying there directly.

"They look like a guy walking a gangplank with a stick in his mouth," said co-author Margaret Rubega, an associate professor of Ecology and

Evolutionary Biology at UConn. Rubega, who is Burgio's Ph.D. advisor, is also Connecticut's State Ornithologist.

"They can't land on the pole itself," Burgio said, "because they need their beaks to climb up or down to where the line attaches to the pole, and they're using their beaks to hold the sticks. So, when they're starting a nest, they land on the line and walk to the pole, instead."

Once the nest is big enough to land on, the birds still use the line as a walkway most of the time. Burgio's study also showed that the parakeets drop the sticks often early in the nest building process and, if dropped, they are not picked up again. Instead, the birds fly off and pick up a fresh branch, and just start over.

The Monk Parakeets are native to subtropical South America and were introduced to the United States in the pet trade in the 1960s. Inevitably, some birds escaped or were released and they subsequently established breeding populations in Florida, Illinois, New York, and Connecticut, among others.

Bright green and noisy, the birds attract attention and ire from homeowners by cutting sticks out of live trees, and using them to build large, communal nests. Utility poles are a favorite substrate for nests and when those get big enough to bridge the gap between live electrical lines, they short the lines out, sometimes blowing out transformers and turning off the power in whole neighborhoods.

The report says Monk Parakeet nests in Florida caused 198 [power outages](#) in one five month period, leaving 10,000 people without power. Attempts to discourage the birds with owl decoys on utility poles have failed; when their nests are removed, they return quickly and build again. Killing the birds is unpopular, and repeated nest removals are costly for utility companies. In Florida, alone, utilities removed 3000 nests in a five

year period, and spent an estimated \$4.7 million.

"Knowing what we know now, we're confident that a device for keeping the birds from walking over the last foot or so of line to the pole will keep them from being able to start a nest on a utility pole," Bergio said.

Such a solution would make it possible for utility companies to keep the lights on in neighborhoods where the parrots live, without the cost of repeated nest removals and the damages that result when [nests](#) catch fire.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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