



The Writer and Nature

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OUR SOUTH LONDON park is stocked with wonders. We have ancient oak trees. Tiny pipistrelle bats. A skulk of foxes. But what I love most are the ring-necked parakeets. They are the first birds that a visitor to the park is likely to see and hear. They are bright green, very loud, and completely undaunted. They swoop and forage. I love them because they are familiar. But I am also intrigued by them. Where did they come from?

I grew up in India where I saw peacocks, owls, snakes and bats in our garden. And parrots of course. They *loved* the mango trees.

In India, parrots make sense. They are native to the arid tropical countryside south of the Himalayas. Over the centuries these clever little birds have been immortalised in numerous literary texts.

Take the fourteenth-century story collection *The Tuti-Nama*, in which a parrot spins one story for every night that its owner is alone, thus captivating her, and preventing her from leaving the home to commit adultery. In all, the clever parrot tells fifty-two stories. The parrot also enjoyed the spotlight in Farid ud-Din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, a twelfth-century Sufi poem in which the birds of the world set out on a quest to find the simurgh, a monarchical, phoenix-like bird, to rule them.

So the parrot had royal *and* literary ties. But how had it made its way to London?



Of the many origin stories I read the one I liked best was about Jimi Hendrix releasing a pair of parakeets in Carnaby Street. Hendrix spent several months in the city on and off before his death at the age of twenty-seven. ‘There’s no place like London’, he said. ‘It’s like a kind of a fairyland.’

Another popular theory was that some parakeets had cut and flown from the South London set of the Bogart and Hepburn classic, *The African Queen*. Others believed the birds had escaped from an aviary roof after debris from a plane crashed through in the 1970s. What was not in dispute was that the parakeets were of Indian origin and had been around in the country long enough to build a thriving community. There are now an estimated 50,000 such birds in Britain.

In 2019, the *Journal of Zoology* laid all the rumours to rest. Using geographic profiling – a technique originally developed in criminology but more recently applied to ecology and conservation biology – the authors of the paper showed that parakeet sightings in Britain pre-dated the most famous stories by at least a century. The authors concluded that what had most likely happened was that the birds had become established due to a pattern of accidental escapes and acts of liberation by private owners and aviaries.

Of *course* I believe them. And yet I’m sure that if a stranger walks into our park and gazing up at our great viridescent flocks of parrots wonders aloud where they came from, I will surely say: ‘Oh, don’t you know? Jimi Hendrix set them free.’