

AUSTIN ENERGY



A monk parakeet flies away from a nest built on a utility pole near the intersection of Riverside Drive and Pleasant Valley Road on Friday. Austin Energy crews are removing nests that create a fire hazard on power poles. Travis Audubon accused the crews of a “cruel attack” on the nests. TAMIR KALIFA / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Audubon, utility are at odds over removal of monk parakeet nests

By Taylor Goldenstein

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No one would deny that a bundle of highly combustible sticks near a large tower pulsating electricity is a fire hazard – not only for tiny, bright green birds in those stick nests but also for the people living nearby.

But how exactly Austin Energy ought to deal with the monk parakeets making their home on the power poles has become a point of contention after a local environmental group raised questions about the utility’s nest removal procedures.

The issue surfaced late Thursday when, in a Facebook post,

Travis Audubon accused Austin Energy’s crews of a “cruel attack” on monk parakeet nests with eggs inside them.

In response to the accusation, Austin Energy officials held a press conference Friday at Pleasant Valley Road and Riverside Drive, where many of the nests are perched, to explain their process and dispute claims that the utility is purposely killing the birds.

The utility only removes nests that are in high-risk areas, such as near a transformer, where they create a fire hazard and the risk of a widespread outage, Austin Energy’s Chief Operating Officer Elaina Ball told reporters. Typically, the stick nests, which

can be several feet wide, cause between five to 10 pole-top fires per year, she said.

“Our crews are out, they’re very careful, they’re very thoughtful, they don’t go out and remove all the nests everywhere,” Ball said, pointing out several nests in power structures above her head that she said had remained untouched for years. “We really only look at nests that have an extreme public safety or reliability issue.”

Ball said the removals are infrequent. Crews have removed 12 nests this year, she said.

Monk parakeets, also known

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as Quaker parrots, are in the midst of their nesting season, which runs from April to June. Travis Audubon would prefer that the utility leave the birds alone until the season is over, said Jordan Price, the group's membership director.

"We understand that nests must be removed because of fire hazards, because of other risks," Price said. "We just want it done in the most thoughtful, respectful way to the birds."

Price said Travis Audubon wrote the Facebook post after a caller said the utility crews were using long poles to knock down the nests late at night, letting birds and eggs fall to the sidewalk.

The utility tends to do maintenance when electric use and street traffic is min-

imal, which often tends to be nighttime, Ball said. The long, insulated poles have clippers on the end, and crews use them to break the nests into pieces, she said.

Though crews do their best to be gentle and avoid having the nests drop to the ground — one crew member has even been rehabilitating some of the birds at home — Ball acknowledged the process often ends in death for the parakeets.

While Ball said Austin Energy sometimes reaches out to conservancy groups to help relocate wildlife near utility structures, she acknowledged it hadn't reached out to Travis Audubon regarding the monk parakeets.

Other cities have protocols for crews to check the nests for eggs and nestlings before safely removing them and handing them over to professional wildlife rehabilitators. Ball said Austin



Austin Energy employees Robert Cullick (left) and Peter McCrady discuss the nests Friday. The utility's COO, Elaina Ball, says it is willing to hear ideas for improving its removal procedures. TAMIR KALIFA / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Energy is willing to hear out such ideas for improving its procedures.

In the meantime, Price said, Travis Audubon is recruiting volunteers to follow utility crews at night to

monitor the nest removals and "ensure the birds are being treated in a humane fashion."

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