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Cockatoo Care

Introduction and Species

Cockatoos are a very diverse group of birds, comprising five genera. Members include (with currently recognized subspecies): Ducorp's, Galah, Gang-gang, Goffin's, Major Mitchell's, Palm, Philippine Red-vented, Red-tailed, Salmon-crested Moluccan, Long-billed Corella, Glossy, Blue-eyed, Black (Funereal and White-tailed), White Umbrella, Little Corella (Bare-eyed and Sanguinea Sanguinea), Lesser Sulfur-crested (*Sulphurea Sulphurea* and Citron-crested), and Greater Sulfur-crested (*Galerita Galerita*–GG, Fitzroyi–F, Triton–T, and Eleonora–E).

To further confuse the issue, many of these species and sub-species have more than one common name (i.e. Major Mitchell's = Leadbeater), or will be recognized by only part of it (White Umbrella = White or Umbrella). They can be white with various touches of yellow, pink, or orange in the crest; or black with touches of pink, red, yellow, or white in body, head, or tail feathers. Sizes range from 12 to 28 inches from head to tip of tail.

Some are very endangered, while others are considered pests in their native lands. Fortunately (or unfortunately), many of these species are not commonly encountered here in the United States as pets, so further discussion will only involve the six more common species: Moluccan, Umbrella, Bare-eyed, Goffin's, Lesser-crested, and Greater-crested Cockatoos.

The Moluccan is a large white bird (20 inches) with a pinkish feather tinge, particularly in its large crest, and a black beak. It originated from the Indonesian islands from where it gets its name. Moluccans can be noisy, gentle, loving, relatively loquacious, and easily trainable. It is the only cockatoo of these six that it is considered endangered.

The Umbrella is a large all white bird (20 inches) with a large crest and a black beak. It also originates from the Moluccan Islands. Umbrellas are noisy, loquacious, and sometimes playful, while sometimes composed.

The Bare-eyed is a smaller white bird (16 inches) with yellowish tail and wing undersides, a whitish-gray beak, and a distinctive blue-gray skin patch around the eye that can often appear puffy. It originates from Northern Australia. Bare-eyed are hardy, playful, very active, moderately loquacious, and easily trainable.

The Goffin is a small white bird (12 inches) with a small crest and a whitish-gray beak. It originates from the Tenimber Islands of Indonesia. Goffin cockatoos can be highly intelligent, gentle, and noisy.

The Lesser-crested is small white bird (12 inches) with a large orange crest, a light orange cheek patch, and a black beak. It originates from several different Indonesian islands, including Celebes and Sunda. Lesser-crested can be noisy, loquacious, whistlers, and easily trainable.

The Greater-crested subspecies can be differentiated by size (15–E, 17–T, 18–F, 20–GG inches), ear patches (yellow–GG, very yellow–F, none–T and E), eye rings (blue–F, T, E, none–GG), and beak sizes (smaller and narrower in E). All are mostly white; with a forward curving, narrow, yellow crest, a black beak, and yellow tail and wing undersides. Site of origin differs by subspecies: Northern/Eastern/Southern Australia, Tasmania, and King Island–GG; Northern Australia–F; New Guinea–T; and the Aru Islands of Indonesia–E. Fred The Cockatoo on "Baretta" was a Triton. Greater-crested can be highly intelligent, very loving, and noisy.

General Information

Cockatoos are very long-lived animals, usually exceeding 30 years and sometimes exceeding 70 years! Therefore, it is crucial to keep this in mind both when selecting one as a pet, and when making plans for the disposition of the cockatoo after the owner is no longer alive, a not-so-uncommon situation.

Cockatoos become sexually mature at 2-4 years of age. Often, minor to extreme behavior changes can occur at this time both in males and females. Males tend to be noisier, especially at dawn and dusk. Cockatoos are natural chewers, whether it's a branch or an expensive piece of woodwork next to their cage. It is a good idea to provide safe wood products for them to chew on.

They are also very good flyers, making wing feather trimming highly recommended for the indoor bird and essential for the outdoor one. Trimming wing feathers also makes the bird dependent upon the owner and helps to develop and/or cement that bond (*If feathers have not been trimmed before, please have a qualified avian veterinarian show the correct procedure!*).

The white cockatoos produce a natural fine powder dust that people can have or develop allergies to. Misting the bird on warm days can help minimize this. Most cockatoos love to be misted, and this should be done at least several times a week for the bird.

Breeding cockatoos is a complex subject and should be discussed at length with a successful, ethical breeder before being considered. Males will often attack and seriously maim females if the female is not in breeding condition. Cockatoos can often bond to other species of birds, people, and other animals, which can often be the object of breeding behaviors.

Both sexes will incubate the two to four eggs during the 28 days of average incubation. The young leave the nest at 10-12 weeks. In the species mentioned, with the exception of the bare-eyed, mature males often can be differentiated from females by their dark brown/black irises versus the red iris in the female. Immature birds have brown irises. However, the only sure ways to sex cockatoos are to either do so surgically or through blood tests. Ask your avian veterinarian for further information about these procedures.

Behavior

Some cockatoo behaviors can be generalized as to what many experienced owners, breeders, and behaviorists feel is being conveyed anthropomorphically. Please remember that these are generalities and may not be indicative of the actual behavior's significance.

Bobbing up and down indicates excitement and happiness.

Lunging forward quickly with open wings indicates fear and self-defense.

Screaming indicates a need for attention, happiness, sexual announcement, or a search for its companions.

Chatter indicates happiness.

Clicking beak/tongue indicates friendly communication to companions, quietly to avoid predator detection.

Whining indicates sadness, illness, or it may be imitating something/one.

Foot stomping (at night) indicates a fear of predators following local noises to their roost.

Feather puffing and shaking indicates relaxation. If puffed condition is maintained, can indicate illness.

Open wings (+/- flapping) without lunging indicates contentment, sunning, and/or a desire to be scratched under the wing or to be misted.

Head tucked into back feathers indicates sleeping and/or illness (especially at an abnormal time).

One foot tucked to body indicates normally resting position or leg/foot injury (especially if not put down upon being encouraged to "step-up" onto a perch or arm).

Rocking indicates boredom, excitement, or illness.

Feather plucking can indicate normal grooming, sexual behavior, abnormal behavior, or illness. Check with your avian veterinarian ASAP, if behavior results in major feather loss that allows a patch or patches of skin to be exposed.

Consistent quiet throughout a 24-hour period indicates unhappiness, fear, or illness and is abnormal.

Putting head down indicates a desire to be mutually groomed, curiosity, or fear.

Environment

A cockatoo's environment often has to be individually tailored to each bird. However, there are some general measures that can be taken. The cage should be at least large enough for the bird to fully spread its wings without touching the sides. Cockatoos not allowed outside of their cages regularly should have even larger cages.

Perches should be placed to encourage exercise, with water and food bowls located at different sites. Perches should be variable in size to encourage nail wear and foot muscle exercise. Natural wood is

best, but needs to be of the non-toxic variety (consult with your avian veterinarian) and be cleaned with a bleach solution and rinsed before use. Sandpaper perch covers are not advised, as they do little for the nail instead abrades the bottom of the foot.

The cage bar spacing should not allow the bird to lodge its head between bars, be strong enough to withstand the power of a cockatoo beak, not have any "V"s where extremities can wedge, and not contain heavy metals such as lead, copper, or zinc (common with galvanized wire).

A bird should never be outside of its cage without supervision, especially around other pets, small children, or idiots who like to tease birds when the owner leaves the room. This situation can end in one or both parties being injured. Do not place the cage near the kitchen (fumes), by outside doors, leaky windows, or vents (constant draft), or in direct and constant sunlight without a place to find shade. Cockatoos do great outside when either in its cage or wing-trimmed and supervised. Other animals, people, noises, etc. can all cause problems, so be aware of what is occurring.

Temperatures can be varied from the 50's up to 100 degrees Fahrenheit, but common sense needs to be used as with a small child—extreme changes are bad and the extreme ends of the spectrum for extended periods of time are bad. Toys should be evaluated for durability, toxicity, potential ingested foreign bodies, ability to entangle, and the ability to be made sharp by cockatoo beak modification. Cage bottoms should be cleaned daily, to evaluate feces and dietary intake, and to avoid food spoilage. Only paper products, such as newspaper, should be used on the bottom to prevent ingestion and impaction of indigestible materials or fungal introduction.

Diet

Food should consist of primarily pellets (95%) with some people food (fruits and veggies and pasta—think about what you would want a child to eat, excepting sugar goods, chocolate, and avocado). Pellet producers that are reputable and have done research include: Harrison's, Kaytee, Pretty Bird, Haagen, and Roudybush. Availability varies at pet stores, and Harrison's and some Roudybush diets are available only directly from a veterinarian. Make sure the correct size pellets are fed. SEEDS ARE NOT THEIR NORMAL DIET!!! Pellets best meet the needs of these birds.

Vitamin and mineral supplementation is not necessary unless instructed to do so by a qualified avian veterinarian. Most birds can be switched to a pellet-only diet very easily. Check with your avian veterinarian as to various methods how. This is the area of most health problems in our avian population and the most easily preventable. Most owners treat their pets as grandchildren, submitting to their pet's whims, instead of as children whose current and future welfare must be kept in perspective. DO NOT DO THIS WITH THEIR DIET!! Fresh water twice a day is best.

Health

Cockatoos have many common diseases, but are not discussed here. Your qualified avian veterinarian can explain a diagnosed or supposed disease. Please contact the Association of Avian Veterinarians or local bird clubs to locate these individuals. Biannual check-ups of your bird, while it is healthy, is an excellent way to catch diseases early, to have peace-of-mind, and to learn the latest information about diet, environment, and health. Nails, beaks, and wings can be professionally groomed. Feces can be checked for parasites and bacterial changes. Blood tests can be performed to detect hidden diseases and to establish normal values for that particular bird. Certain diseases can be tested for and even vaccinated against. Radiographs (X-rays) can be performed to establish normalcy for the bird. Be proactive and prevent, don't respond and treat. A dog or cat goes in yearly for a checkup, why shouldn't a bird that will live longer and is a greater investment get a checkup?

If your bird is acting differently than normal, this often indicates illness. If a bird shows outward signs of illness, this means it has progressed to the point where the bird cannot hide it. Always contact your avian veterinarian to determine if they feel the bird should be seen. The longer the wait, the poorer the prognosis.

Cockatoos are wonderful pets and companions, and can provide a lifetime of enjoyment when cared for properly. Good luck with your avian friend.