

Domestically Raised Cockatoos

by Barbara Bailey

Replacing Wild-Caught Cockatoos

Up until the last twenty years, cockatoos were caught in the wild and imported into the United States for the pet trade. Some of them made good pets, but others remained exceedingly difficult. Even imported cockatoos that were put into breeding situations could be very problematic. Many of us thought that with the successful breeding and hand raising of baby cockatoos, the problems that had been encountered with wild-caught birds would be a thing of the past. We would have loving, cuddly babies who would grow up tame and docile, bond/identify with us, would never be aggressive towards us or bite us or our significant others, and who would not be afraid of us. Were we ever wrong! We have raised a generation of screwed-up birds, the result of human ignorance and conceit. We now have hand-raised cockatoos who destroy their feathers, mutilate themselves, scream incessantly, bite unpredictably, become terrified of us, exhibit serious aggression, are afraid to come out of their cages, do not know how to play, want to be cuddled 24/7, who are afraid of other cockatoos, and who do not know how to mate or raise offspring. As co-director of TARA (Tucson Avian Rescue and Adoption Foundation), I've had a great number of these cockatoos pass through my life and, I live with several of them — both domestic and wild-caught. And, strangely enough, the wild-caught ones are easier to live with.

Why do so many of the domestically raised cockatoos have such problems? In short, they do not know how to be birds. In many cases, they may not even realize they are birds. Why? The reason is because we really do not know how to raise these exotic creatures. This is not surprising given the limited knowledge we have about their lives in the wild. And unfortunately all too often the lessons we have learned from the wild have been ignored because of established avicultural protocols. A clear example is the fact that so many babies are raised in brightly lit glass aquariums when they are raised in dark cavities in the wild.

A Job for the Parents

But wait! Why are we raising them in the first place? Shouldn't their parents do it? Many of us (myself included, I'm sorry to say) were so eager to get baby Cockatoos that we just focused on how to accomplish that. Our concerns were mostly with the number of birds raised and their physical health. We didn't consider or even know the needs of wild-caught cockatoos and often did not provide the proper environment for their successful reproduction. Many wild-caught cockatoo parents were so nervous that they broke eggs, mutilated or killed babies (or each other), or just didn't take care of their babies. Some never mated or laid at all. We didn't want to risk losing a single baby. We thought we could do a better job and end up with a better pet bird. It didn't work out that way for

many reasons. Many breeders thought that if we even let babies see their parents or other adult cockatoos that they would not be good pets. Curiously, some breeders also thought that if people gave young cockatoos too much attention they would become spoiled and would not be good pets. With these misconceptions, it is no wonder why these cockatoos became so needy.

Proof of our Ignorance

We are now learning just how wrong we have been. When Katy McElroy put a camera lens in the nestbox of a Moluccan cockatoo pair and recorded their behavior as they raised their baby (see "Weaning Sadie" in the 48th issue of Pet Bird Report), it was a revelation. I knew that parent cockatoos were very attentive to their babies, but when I saw those tapes at the 2001 PBR Convention it made a huge impression on me. Ms. McElroy's observations revealed that the parents spent an enormous amount of time with their baby, fondling, preening and just having physical contact with the chick. The parents put up with a lot of annoying antics on the part of the baby. The parent birds were patient, loving, consistent, and steady. The baby was fed on demand and NEVER cried. In fact, that baby always looked content and secure. As Ms. McElroy wrote, "Baby cockatoos should never cry." Most of the baby cockatoos I've seen have cried because they were hungry, and that hunger creates insecurity. Maybe the breeder or hand feeder was on a rigid feeding schedule, was waiting for the crop to empty, or it was just inconvenient. Maybe they just accepted the common but erroneous myth that all baby cockatoos cried. Maybe we just don't know enough.

Cockatoo Food Issues

Inappropriate hand feeding and weaning may result in other problems. Some birds, especially cockatoos, seem to have "food issues." These birds may have been weaned onto just one food, often seed, and appear deathly afraid of new foods, no matter how they are presented. Others may have been force weaned at too young an age; this may result in anxious birds who seem to have little self-confidence. Others were tube or gavage fed. This technique involves inserting a tube into the mouth, down the throat, and into the crop. Birds fed this way never learn to manipulate food with their beak and tongue or how to swallow. In other words, they never learn to eat and this seems to be particularly problematic for cockatoos. Baby Sadie was fed by daddy at one year old after having a traumatic experience in the flight. According to Ms. McElroy, this was more for comfort than for nutrition. At the recent Companion Parrot Quarterly convention in Minneapolis, Carla Freed showed the audience videos of the intense time and energy-consuming care that a Bodini's Amazon provided both her eggs and chicks. Rita Groszmann wrote about the devotion and loving care her Green-wing Macaws gave their baby in the last issue of CPQ. Phoebe Linden has written about the feral flock of Amazons that visits her property regularly. She has noticed the parents, usually the male, feeding an older offspring if he or she becomes stressed or needs reassurance. According to their parents, baby parrots should be fed on demand.

We are learning more and more all of the time that proves to us that we have not done a

good job. Many naive people have been lured into buying unweaned babies because they were told it was the only way to get the bird to bond to them. If this were true, every cockatoo born in the wild would still be bonded to his parents. I suspect this may also be the reason some young cockatoos suddenly seem to become afraid of the person who hand raised them. That individual still wants to smother them with love at a time they would naturally separate from their parents and begin establishing relationships with other young birds. Unfortunately, most people who go through this have hurt feelings at first and then, taking it personally, decide "the bird doesn't like me anymore." Sally Blanchard has demonstrated that, with time and patience, using specific techniques, one can win back these young birds but most people do not have that patience and want that baby to accept them immediately once it has "turned on them." Bewildered, frustrated people who don't know what went wrong often give up these babies around the age of 1½ to 2. Lots of things can and do go wrong; sometimes we don't even know until it's too late. Sometimes we never know at all, and a wonderful bird who just needed some understanding and patience loses his home.

Tame but not Domesticated

Our birds may be tame but they are still wild animals, as it takes decades of breeding and living in captivity to achieve "domestication." Because parrots are essentially hard-wired to react to certain situations in certain ways, and because they often follow their instincts without consulting us, it's important to know what wild birds do, where they sleep, how they socialize and play, and what they eat. When Stewart Metz and I went to Indonesia last year, we attempted to record what wild Moluccans eat. We still don't have a clue because we don't even have English names for their seasonal foods. How can we generalize about nutrition when we don't even know what they eat in the wild? The pet industry and parrot caregivers can only guess at their nutritional needs and try to meet them.

Learning from the Wild

We did, however, learn many things about the wild parrots of Indonesia. They are incredibly active and playful and they fly with grace and joy (see "Glorious Gam: A Paradise for Parrots" in issue #57 of the CPQ, Summer, 2002). I used to think of Eclectus as perch potatoes; I now have a greater appreciation for their incredible flying skills. Many of us would agree that most birds do not get enough exercise and I believe that has something to do with the current trend of allowing cockatoos to fly. There is a wildness and joy to birds when they are really able to fly skillfully and I feel these birds are happier and less aggressive. The birds we saw in the wild had greater physical skills, of course, but they also appeared to be more confident and filled with a joy of life that is missing in some domestic birds. There are, of course, risks involved, and having a flighted bird has its drawbacks.

Runaway Hormones?

Finally, we encounter what may be the last frontier: hormones and sexual behavior. When hand-raised babies reach puberty their hormones kick in and many of them become confused and frustrated. They do not know how to handle the new emotions and we have not demonstrated much insight or ability to help them learn how to behave as they mature. These birds, especially the males, may become aggressive and unpredictable and may lose their homes as a result. In Indonesia we learned that a young cockatoo may stay with his parents for over a year and help them raise the next clutch. These babies have seen their parents copulate, lay, brood, and hatch and feed babies. They know how to handle themselves because they've learned from the experts: their parents.

At the Avian Welfare Coalition Round Table in June 2002, a vet from the University of Pennsylvania suggested that the way we feed our companion parrots is part of the hormone problem. In the wild, they eat seasonal foods and there are times of deprivation, varying with the weather cycles. Hormones and breeding behavior are dictated by these critical influences. Many of our birds are fed generously all year, plus we often keep them up late to accommodate our lifestyles. The year-round feasting plus the extra light may keep them turned on for a longer time than nature intended. Add to that the fact that many of these birds are physically handled in an intimate manner that can encourage continuing sexual behavior.

Not a Perfect World

We have gone wrong in a lot of areas, and there is undoubtedly much more that we don't even know about yet. What are we going to do about it? In a perfect world all the birds would go back to the jungles and forests and would live happily ever after. Well, this isn't a perfect world, our pampered babies could never make it in the wild, and even though the United States no longer imports birds, Asia and Europe more than make up for it. So what should we do? We should continue to learn as much as possible and to support conservation and studies of parrots in the wild as well as avian medical research.

We should also become teachers ourselves and spread the word about dwindling parrot habitats and populations. We also need to understand that neither parrots in the wild nor in our homes have adequate legal protection. We should also be cautious about promoting parrots as pets as we are still fighting the misconception that they're easy to care for. We all know that's far from the truth, but if we don't educate the public, who will? One thing we shouldn't do is give up, not on our birds and not on ourselves. We should not let ourselves become mired in guilt, because that won't help our birds or the situation.

As a matter of fact, I believe that most people who feel badly about their birds being in captivity are probably conscientious and doing their best. Being made to feel guilty about keeping parrots may influence people to give up their parrots rather than increasing their dedication to their care. When people are open to and encouraged by parrot education, the people who rededicate themselves are the ones whose bird care improves as their knowledge increases. We all need to be aware that none of us is perfect and that each bird is unique and has different needs that can be met in different ways.

Finally, we should support and help each other if we want to help our birds.