



Cockatoos

AAV Companion Bird Care Series

Cockatoos are native to Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific islands. Most free-ranging species are considered threatened or endangered, and efforts to protect these birds have resulted in a ban on importation for pet purposes in the United States. High quality companion birds are available from breeders. The “white” species (eg, umbrella, sulphur-crested, citron) are in high demand because they are such good quality companion birds. However, they are also notorious for behavioral problems, including feather destructive and self-mutilation behavior, screaming, biting, and aggression. The personalities of cockatoos range from the “reserved” demeanor of the Moluccan to the comical and playful corella. All are affectionate and highly intelligent birds, requiring proper socialization, significant mental stimulation, and opportunities to carry out their natural behaviors. They love attention and can be taught to perform tricks.

Vital Statistics

Total length: 12-28 inches (30-71 cm)

Body weight: 300-1100 g

Age of sexual maturity:

Small: 1-3 years

Large: 4-6 years

Typical life span: 80 years

Common Disorders of Cockatoos

- Behavioral (screaming, biting, inappropriate/excessive reproductive behaviors)
- Feather destructive behavior
- Self mutilation
- Cloacal prolapse
- Pododermatitis (bumblefoot)
- Obesity
- Lipomas
- Metabolic bone disease (chicks)
- Fatty liver syndrome (chicks)
- Upper respiratory disease
- Anti-social behavior, especially mate aggression
- Oral abscesses
- Fungal infections
- Liver disease
- Psittacine beak and feather disease virus
- Avian bornavirus infection

Many common disease conditions in cockatoos are the result of malnutrition. Visiting your avian veterinarian for routine health checks will help prevent many diseases and support you in having a long, satisfying relationship with your cockatoo.

For help in finding an avian veterinarian in your area, contact the Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) by visiting www.AAV.org and click on “Find-a-Vet.”

What to Expect from Your Cockatoo

Cockatoos are appreciated as companion birds because they enjoy “cuddling.” They are like small children — they can be charming and may try to “steal the show.” Care must be taken to avoid spoiling these birds. They require so much attention that they can be extremely noisy and destructive if improperly socialized. Because of the potential noise level, cockatoos are best suited to single family dwellings without close neighbors. Imprinted cockatoos may become excessively possessive of their owners, leading to aggression toward others, unpredictability and other vices, such as feather destruction. Cockatoos have some capacity to mimic, but their voice is not as clear as other parrots. Of all the companion bird species, they are the most reluctant to change their eating habits to a healthy diet. Most cockatoo species produce abundant powder down, which is shed as feather dust in the cage and on furniture and clothing, and is found circulating in the air. The feather dust may cause respiratory disorders in susceptible individuals or other birds. A high quality air purifier is recommended for the home.

Is Your Cockatoo a Male or a Female?

In most cockatoo species, the gender can be determined by the color of the iris: in adult males it is usually dark brown, and in adult females it is light brown or reddish brown. However, this does not hold completely true in all individuals; DNA sexing, followed by endoscopy may be used for sex determination. Males are known to occasionally kill their mates, even in pairs that have been previously compatible.

Are Cockatoos Tame?

Young, hand-raised cockatoos adapt readily to new surroundings and handling procedures. They should be exposed early in life to novel situations (car travel, hospital visits, multiple visitors in the household, other household pets) so that they are well adjusted to these events. Consistent training, leadership, patience, a sense of ritual, and the offering of rewards may be necessary to modify behavior problems relating to screaming for attention to demand the presence of a family member.

What Should You Feed Your Cockatoo?

For a long, healthy life, cockatoos should be fed a high quality, toxin-free, formulated diet, preferably certified organic. Supplementation may include chopped organic vegetables and fruit. The addition of very limited amounts of seeds and nuts may be beneficial.

What Do Cockatoos Do All Day?

Most cockatoos are playful and can be amused with simple toys. Toys must be sturdy and free of toxic metals, hooks, sharp objects, and easily consumed components. They should also be provided with safe, destructible toys. Like all parrots they have a powerful beak. Social interactions with multiple human individuals as well as foraging and problem-solving opportunities may help keep a cockatoo mentally stimulated. Large diameter fresh-cut branches from nontoxic, pesticide-free trees should be available. Check with your veterinarian for recommendations of available safe trees.

Should the Wings Be Clipped?

The decision to clip wings or allow free flight should be made carefully. Birds allowed free flight benefit from exercise and mental stimulation; however, free-flying birds may be injured by hitting windows or ceiling fans or hurt by encountering toxic materials. With careful planning and training, some birds may be allowed free flight in a safe area. The goal of clipping the wings is not to make the bird incapable of flight, but to prevent it from developing rapid and sustained flight and to prevent escape. Clippings must be done carefully and tailored to each individual to prevent flight and injuries from falling.

How to Keep Your Cockatoo Healthy, Happy and Safe!

- Take your cockatoo to your veterinarian immediately after purchase, then at least once every 6-12 months for examinations.
- Feed a fresh, high quality, toxin-free, formulated diet with daily supplementation of chopped vegetables and fruit.
- Avoid feeding large amounts of nuts, seeds, sweet items, and salty foods, as these may contribute to unwanted behaviors.
- Provide clean, fresh, uncontaminated water (try using water bottles) and replace twice daily.
- Offer toys, social interaction, and foraging and problem-solving opportunities.
- Provide occasional opportunity for bath, shower, or misting (at least weekly).
- Avoid spraying house with insecticides.

Housing for Your Cockatoo Should:

- Be as large as possible.
- Be clean, secure, and safe.
- Be particularly secure because cockatoos can be escape artists.
- Be constructed of nontoxic materials (some cages may contain toxic metals, such as zinc).
- Contain variably sized perches made of clean, nontoxic, pesticide-free wood or branches.
- Avoid having perches located directly over food or water containers.
- Have easy-to-clean food and water containers.
- Be offered occasional opportunities for protected outdoor exposure to fresh air, direct sunlight, and exercise.

Essential Safety Tips

Cockatoos are very curious and will investigate anything new in their environment. That is why it is important to prevent their access to:

- Ceiling fans
- Stove tops with hot burners, pans, or skillets
- Fumes from overheated non-stick cookware
- Sandpaper-covered perches
- Tobacco and cigarette smoke
- Chocolate, avocado, salt, alcohol
- Toxic houseplants
- Pesticides or chemical cleaners
- Easily dismantled toys
- Dogs, cats, and unsupervised children
- Sources of heavy metals, such as lead or zinc (stained glass windows, pewter, some mini blinds, or linoleum)
- Plug-in air fresheners
- Scented candles

What Your Veterinarian Looks for in a Healthy Cockatoo

Clear, bright eyes
(no discharge)

Dry, open nares

Smooth beak

Smooth, bright feathers
that are not ragged,
discolored or broken

Alert, erect
posture

Good body
condition

Even pattern of skin on the feet,
nails of appropriate length



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