

Male Aggression in Cockatoos

by Dr. Walter N. Frey, Idabel, OK

The problem of male cockatoo aggression has plagued aviculturists for a long time. I am referring to fatal or near fatal attacks on the female, not normal squabbles where neither party gets hurt. A variety of methods have been used with varying degrees of success. It is my purpose to propose a new (radical) approach to solving the problem.

To let you know where I'm coming from, I raise the following cockatoos: Moluccan *Cacatua moluccensis* (six pairs), Umbrella *Cacatua alba* (six pairs), Citron-crested *Cacatua sulphurica citrinocristata* (two pairs), and Goffin's *Cacatua goffini* (four pairs). I feed Major Mitchell's *Cacatua leadbeateri*, Lesser Sulphur-crested *Cacatua sulphurica sulphurica*, Tritons *Cacatua galerita triton*, Eleanoras *Cacatua galerita eleonora*, and some extra Goffin's and Citrons with hope of breeding them, maybe next year.

I have personal experience with male Cockatoo aggression. After waiting four years for a pair of Citron-crested Cockatoos to produce, I found the female one morning with the upper mandible ripped off, bleeding to death. I also had a Moluccan starve his female to death by confining her to the nest box and not letting her out to feed. If you have cockatoos, the question is not "if" but "when" you will have similar stories to tell.

What could possibly cause a male cockatoo to one day decide to kill his mate? Obviously this is not a normal activity. It probably rarely if ever occurs in the wild. After all, females are a limiting resource without which the male will not have a genetic future.

How do Cockatoos mate in the wild? Please note the corresponding factor in a proposed nonviolent cap-

tive setting.

Detailed field research reports are scant at best. But we may make some assumptions from what we do know.

Factor 1:

Compatible Mate Selection

Mate selection takes place under flock conditions. Birds growing up together form a pair bond over a period of years. During this time they are also socialized as proper members of their flock and learn their place in it.

Factor 2:

Large Available Space

Once the pair is formed, they share a large space where they can get touching close together or many yards apart, at will.

Factor 3:

Leisure Time Activity Outlets

When the pair is not actively courting, both male and female spend hours in trees nipping leaves, flowers and branches. Some (Galahs, for instance) even peel the bark of trees around their nest. Also, during egg lay-

Factor 4:

Provide Multiple Food Sources

When the pair is feeding in a tree they will feed on different branches or different flowers or fruits. On the ground they may feed on neighboring patches, not dig at the same tuber in the same hole.

Factor 5:

Provide Multiple Nest Boxes

When the pair is ready for breeding they select a cavity suitable for their nest, perhaps after rejecting several sites as being too low or too high, too big or too small, facing the wrong direction, or being in the wrong location. If they can't find a suitable site many will not breed at all.

Factor 6:

Remove Irritations and Challenges

The birds hang around and usually the male defends the nest site against

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all comers especially conspecifics since they could get his female or nest site. He has an elaborate arsenal of behavioral resources to frighten off conspecifics without a fight. Actual fights are used as a last resort.

Factor 7:

Remove Young From Aviary

In many species the young, when fledged, will join the flock while the parent bond still holds.

Factor 8:

Break Up and

Remate Incompatible Pairs

When a pair rejoins the flock after breeding and they do not get along they may well leave each other and select new, more suitable mates.

Factor 9:

Remove Nest Box After Breeding Season

When back in the flock the breeders leave their nest site and no longer defend it or hang around it.

Considering that these factors operate in a general way under natural conditions, how can we duplicate as many of these factors as possible in aviculture?

Take the Test

I have found nine factors worth consideration up to now. These can be implemented with varying degrees of completeness. You may assign yourself points based on your practices. The more points you get the less your chances of finding that dead hen.

Points

1. Start with a group of birds and let them select their own mates. 1-10
2. Have large cages (20 ft. long is not too big). 1-10
3. Give fresh branches, toys, chewing materials daily. 1-10
4. Provide two or more feeders per pair. 1-10
5. Provide multiple, different nest boxes. 1-10
6. Remove irritations and challenges from the pair. 1-10

- a. no line of sight to other similar cockatoos. 1-5
- b. no irritations whatever they might be. 1-5
7. Remove young when fledged or weaned. 1-10
8. Break up pairs who fight too much. 1-10
9. Remove nest boxes after the breeding season. 1-10

Since I've been studying this problem I've been more careful to observe my cockatoos and have noticed that although my pair of Eleanoras is in a 20 foot long cage they still get into fights and many times one will sit on the perch on one end while the other stays on the perch on the other end (they sleep together and have produced nice babies).

The Tritons were introduced to each other in a 30 ft. by 4 ft. by 4 ft. cage. The male sat on the top perch stomping his foot while the hen ate the almonds out of both food dishes and then retired to the other end of the cage. After a half hour or so they met in the middle and started grooming. When the Eleonoras started calling and displaying 60 feet away, the male flew to the top of the cage displayed and screamed while the females in both cages sat on the bottom of their respective cages, quiet, with their beaks covered.

The Major Mitchell's reside in a 16 ft. by 4 ft. wide by 8 ft. high aviary and get along well. I put in two nest boxes, one 10 inches x 8 inches x 20 inches deep, the other a big oak log 24 inches tall. Within a short time I heard screams of their first ever squabble. They have since settled down and are reducing the oak stump to sawdust.

Obviously much more experimentation is necessary to solve the problem of cockatoo male aggression. We can do it if we work together on it. My thanks to the kind and knowledgeable folks on The RARS list on the world wide web. Special thanks also to Eb Cravens for his stimulating articles and James Murphy, who talks with Cockatoos.

Please contact me with your ideas, suggestions or critique. It will be much appreciated, especially by the Cockatoos in our care.

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