

# Cockatoo Soup

## Mixing Four Different Species of Cockatoos

by Greg Bockheim, Birmingham Zoo  
Birmingham, AL

### Ingredients

Two wild-caught Medium Sulphur-crested Cockatoos (*Cacatua galerita leonora*). Thought to be a pair by the previous owner, these two birds were housed together for several years. One of these birds (M2) being the dominant bird, aggressively lunges at its "mate" or any other approaching bird. The other (M1) is very passive, cowering to the cage floor when threatened or approached by other birds or humans.

One mature male Goffin's Cockatoo (*Cacatua goffini*). This secretive and shy bird is the "plucker" of the group, removing all the feathers on its chest, abdomen, and upper wing coverts.

One adolescent male Lesser Sulphur-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua sulphurea sulphurea*). This is a charming semi-tame little bird, flying to the keepers shoulder upon entering the aviary.

One mature female Umbrella

Cockatoo (*Cacatua alba*). Afraid of most of the staff, hissing and threatening anyone approaching her cage.

### Introduction

Rare is the opportunity to introduce such a variety of parrot species in one aviary setting. The above personality characteristics were observed while the birds were housed in separate cages during a four month quarantine. Individual behaviors were noted to help in predicting compatibility and aggression patterns before the birds were to be brought together.

During the third month of quarantine the Lesser Sulphur-crest and the Goffin's Cockatoo were allowed to fly freely about the room. Their interac-

tions appeared to be friendly and curious as they played during their free hours. It was felt that free time would give these two smaller birds the opportunity to become acquainted so that they might become companions when introduced to the much larger and more aggressive birds. The Umbrella, being a large, robust, and unfriendly bird made us believe that she would keep to herself.

### Preparation

All of these cockatoos were to be exhibited together in a large indoor/outdoor aviary. Their first introduction would take place in the interior, off exhibit portion of their new flight which measures 1.5m deep by 2m wide by 3m high ( 5 x 6½ x 10ft.). This flight has access, through a guillotine window, to a large exhibit aviary measuring 3m x 3m x 5m (10 x 10 x 16ft.).

The birds would spend the first sev-

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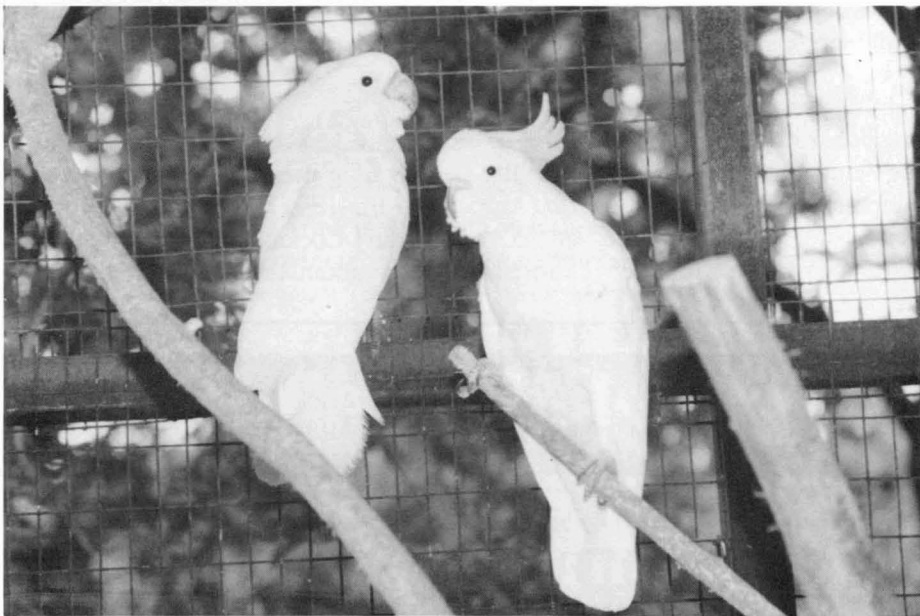
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*Four different species of cockatoos becoming acquainted in a new display enclosure.*



*The Umbrella Cockatoo claimed the highest perch with the Sulphur-crested just below.*

eral days in the smaller flight indoors, familiarizing themselves with the cleaning and feeding routine, and then be given access to the large outdoor flight through the window.

Five feeding stations were installed from ground level to the highest perches near the ceiling. One water bowl was offered. A maze of natural tree branches were installed from the cage floor to the ceiling offering the birds a wide variety of potential territories and provide for individual distance. Because many psittacines prefer to climb, vertical limbs were provided in addition to horizontal limbs, allowing the birds to climb and fly out of each others way.

Although most species of white

cockatoos are social "flock" birds in the wild, reports of multiple species remaining in continuous contact, or flocking together, are rare. In Australia I have observed large numbers Rose-breasted Cockatoos in the company of Bare-eyed Cockatoos, and an occasional Long-billed Corella (thought to be released pets in Sydney) happily feeding among a flock of Greater Sulphur-crested Cockatoos.

Within captivity it is often feared that aggressiveness between individuals, let alone differing species, may result in injury or death. Because of this we clipped the right wing of what we felt was our most confrontational bird, Medium Sulphur-crest (M2), in order to slow him down. We also had

concerns for the safety of the smaller cockatoos, the Lesser and the Goffin's, but felt they were agile enough to stay out of the larger birds way. Because all of these birds would be newly introduced, we felt that it would be difficult for one aggressive member to relentlessly pursue any single bird without being distracted by the others in the flock.

### Mixing Ingredients

Of utmost importance, when introducing birds or any animal, is introducing them to each other and their new surroundings properly. Close scrutiny of individuals is necessary throughout the early introduction process in order to immediately act upon dangerous interactions that may result in severe injury or death. Birds such as cockatoos have to be introduced to a new "shared" aviary at the same time. Such introduction prevents any single animal from establishing a territory or from knowing the environment so well that it has an advantage over new aviary inhabitants.

Ideally such introductions should take place early in the day to allow adequate time for the animals to feed and seek safe roosting sites. Observations of the cockatoo introduction were made from across the room, about 4 meters (13 feet) from the flight. On many occasions I was afraid to leave the room lest disaster should strike.

All of our cockatoos were brought together in the indoor portion of their flight by 9A.M. Initially the birds climbed from their crates on the floor to the highest perches in the flight. Within the first few seconds our Umbrella began to strut back and forth on the uppermost perches. Medium Sulphur-crest (M2) also began displaying, hopping from the upper perches onto the wire, spreading his wings and vocalizing. Medium Sulphur-crest (M1) hung on the wire walls in an attempt to stay out of the Umbrella's way. The Lesser Sulphur-crest and the Goffin's also retreated to perches, still in the upper level, but out of the way of the Umbrella's very vocal and erratic displaying. The combination of vocalizations on this first day of introduction was absolutely deafening!

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Within the first five minutes of the cockatoos introduction, the Umbrella and M2 had begun pursuing the other birds in the flight. Initially the Umbrella attempted to engage the Goffin's in preening, lowering its head to the chest of the Goffin's. Although the Goffin's did join in allopreening, he soon began to cower from the Umbrella's aggressive advances.

M2 also engaged in allopreening with the Umbrella, appearing to be a more enthusiastic partner. Throughout this time the Lesser Sulphur-crest allowed the close approach of the Umbrella, perhaps due to her initial coy approaches, but soon began to flee and move to the flight's mid-level perches. Throughout the first 60 minutes the Umbrella began to aggressively pursue all of the other cockatoos except M2. It appeared that M2 and the Umbrella were forming a very strong bond.

All of the birds began to feed from the five feeding dishes placed at varying levels. If approached by the Umbrella, while feeding, all of the birds (except M2) would drop what they were eating and flee.

On the second day of observation it became obvious that a hierarchy had been established with the Umbrella being the feared and leading member of the group with M2 its closely guarded mate.

M2's original mate, M1, became the lowest member in the hierarchy, pushed to the ground level perches in the flight and to feeding from the lowest dish or the floor.

The Lesser Sulphur-crest began to inhabit the mid-level perches in the flight and, like the Goffin's, took on a sedate nature perhaps to avoid attracting the attention of the Umbrella.

For some reason, the Umbrella relentlessly pursued the Goffin's Cockatoo, even to the lowest areas of the flight and floor. Not given adequate feeding opportunities and becoming increasingly lethargic, the Goffin's was placed in a "howdy" cage at mid-level within the flight. Only the Lesser Sulphur-crest was seen to venture onto the Goffin's small brass cage. After two days the Goffin's appeared to have regained strength and energy and was released back into the flight. From this

point on the Umbrella did not single-out and continuously pursue the Goffin's alone.

Seven days after being introduced in the indoor flight, the cockatoos appeared to have a "working" hierarchy that allowed each member to exist semi-peaceably within the flock. Each member had found its own safe zone and very little interaction was observed by any of the birds except M2 and the Umbrella.

The window was then opened and the birds given access to the outdoor exhibit aviary. Peanuts were placed on the ledge of the window and after 20 minutes the Lesser approached the window, grabbed a peanut, and hastily ran back inside. One by one, all of the larger cockatoos took a peek out of the window and then dashed back indoors. Much screaming vocalization accompanied the birds retreat to the upper branches indoors after viewing the big world outdoors.

After nearly 30 minutes the lesser jaunted outside, wings outstretched, occasionally biting at the perch but not so much as a peep. M2 sat in the window for several minutes joined every few minutes by the Umbrella for a quick bout of allopreening. Curiously, M1 would approach M2 on the window ledge and, placing their beaks side by side, the pair would click them without coming in contact. It took 43 minutes total for M2 to walk out into the aviary, soon followed by the Umbrella.

When zoo visitors approached the aviary, both birds would fly or climb to the window and retreat inside. About this time it was mid afternoon and all of the cockatoos went back indoors for their afternoon "siesta."

By late afternoon all but the Goffin's had come back outside. The Umbrella stayed to the far back portion of the aviary while the two mediums moved about curiously checking out their new outdoor home. Coming into close proximity to each other, the Medium Sulphurs would again place their beaks side-by-side and click them, causing great distress to the distant Umbrella who would vocalize her disapproval. The Goffin's did not venture out into the outdoor aviary until the third day.

Interactions between the birds were far fewer in the outdoor aviary. Soon the Umbrella and M2 rested and roosted side-by-side, and M2 and M1 showed very little interest in each other after the first day. The Goffin's and M1 are the most likely to take their mid-day snooze indoors and the Lesser in the outdoor aviary on a favorite perch near the ceiling.

## Conclusion

Two very favorable events have taken place since the initial introduction in February. Medium Sulphur-crest, M1, has been DNA sexed and, even though she has black eyes, was determined to be a female. Even more exciting news is that the Goffin's has completely stopped plucking and is a healthy, robust, and fully feathered member of the flock. It would be interesting to know how long he had been plucking and what sort of living conditions he was in prior to coming to the zoo.

Among the odd observations made during this flock's introduction were:

- When the birds were first introduced, the feeding Goffin's would take a large pellet in its beak, rub it all over its body and then balance it on its back and continue to preen until the pellet finally fell to the floor. This strange behavior was observed on three occasions during the first two days of introduction and never observed again.

- M2 stopped making the typical Medium Sulphur-crested vocalizations when given access to the outdoor aviary. Instead, he began making loud noises that sounded like a small car reeving its engine.

- After being outdoors, while vocalizing, the Umbrella began the typical head bouncing gestures many tame parrots make when seeking attention. Interestingly, the Lesser ceased making them completely.

It was very exciting to have the opportunity to introduce these very different cockatoos into a common aviary. Making a commitment to observe your birds during critical moves such as these may produce results that are rewarding to you and beneficial your birds. It certainly did in this case. ➤