

Breeding the Blue-eyed Cockatoo

Cacatua ophthalmica

by Sheldon Dingle, Alhambra, CA

The Blue-eyed Cockatoo *Cacatua ophthalmica* is a stocky white bird with a rear-curved crest something like the crest of the Salmon-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua moluccensis* or a White (Umbrella) Cockatoo *Cacatua alba*. In the Blue-eyed, however, the crest is mostly white with some yellow feathers that are not very visible until the crest is raised. The Blue-eyed and the Salmon-crested Cockatoo are very close to the same size. In appearance, the Blue-eyed seems to have a very large head. It gets its name from its



Five young Blue-eyed Cockatoos enjoy the east-facing flight on the author's old bird and horse farm. Here they socialize and act like birds. Eight additional babies were hatched at the farm.



Obviously, these juveniles see a feeding syringe. The bright blue ophthalmic eye-ring and yellow feathers in the crest already show.

This free-flight aviary is 50 x 50 feet X 10 feet high but the assorted handfed cockatoos like to visit the author in person.



The adult Blue-eyed Cockatoo's bright blue eye-ring and bi-colored crest.

bright blue eye-ring, generally a more intense blue than the eye-rings of either *Galerita triton* or *G. eleonora*.

The Blue-eyed Cockatoo inhabits the islands of New Britain and New Ireland in the Bismarck Archipelago, Papua New Guinea. According to Juniper and Parr in their book *Parrots* (a wonderful reference book for just this sort of data), the Blue-eyed is fairly common throughout much of its range but can be locally scarce. Its world population is unknown. Its behavior is mostly unknown but presumed to be similar to that of the closely related Sulphur-crested Cockatoo. It is uncommon in captivity.

All I know about Blue-eyed Cockatoos I learned from one pair and 13 of their offspring. A number of years ago I took a pair of Blue-eyed Cockatoos on a breeding loan — the first pair I had ever seen. Before the time of the bird embargo and quarantine, a pilot is said to have brought these birds into the U.S. I didn't really know their ages or history. The pair was well bonded, quite mature, and seemed willing to breed. The male had a mean streak and would attack but I got along pretty well with the female who had obviously been someone's pet. When the male wasn't paying attention, I could scratch her head and she would perch on my wrist. In addition to being ornery, the male was feather plucked and looked rather shabby.

The pair went through the usual quarantine and had all the vet checks. When the time came, they went into a "California Breeder" cage eight feet long by four feet square in a section of the farm that contained numerous other species of cockatoos. The elevated cages were sheltered only at one end so the birds were able to glare at their neighbors through the wire. Although most of the cages were four or five feet apart, the male Blue-eyed stayed ticked off at every bird he saw. He spent a lot of time hanging on the wire wishing to attack a neighboring cockatoo. In his frustration he abused the female enough to cause me concern.

When I moved the pair to a smaller enclosure (a four foot cube) and in the proximity of African Grey Parrots and Indian Ring-necked Parakeets the male

calmed down. Their new home was under a large tree, well shaded, and quite private. The change affected the male's attitude for the better. Indeed, he became gentle and loving — to the female, not me. Indeed, they began copulating often throughout the day.

I attached a nest box to the outside of the cage. The box was about four feet deep and 12 inches square. The walls were made of plywood with sheet metal sandwiched between. Thus the birds could chew the inside walls and not escape, while the wooden outer wall served as better insulation than sheet metal. The birds were vigorous chewers but plenty of eucalyptus branches stuffed into the cage kept them occupied.

Both birds explored the nest box and seemed to like it. It wasn't long until the hen disappeared and a peep through the inspection door found her on an egg. She laid two eggs but just one hatched and the pair seemed to be doing a pretty good job of raising the baby. Alas, it died while in pinfeathers.

She laid again and the plan was to pull the baby after the first week. To my surprise, the eggs disappeared. The male turned out to be a notorious egg eater. It became a game of who got the egg as the female never seemed to tire of laying. The male beat me most of the time until I modified the nest box by putting a sloping false bottom in it with a hole designed to let the egg roll through and drop into a soft nest of shavings. I'll spare you the details of that stressful time of trial and error but it finally became possible to gather the eggs and incubate them artificially. There is enough in the literature that I won't go into incubation and


handfeeding from day one.

The end result was 13 (if I remember correctly) beautiful baby Blue-eyed Cockatoos over the span of a few years. The babies are the sweetest of any cockatoo I've ever raised. They would make absolutely delightful pets but, of course all the Blue-eyed in this country should be put into a breeding situation.

When the babies fledged they were put into eight foot long aviaries that adjoined a huge free-flight enclosure. Eventually they were allowed to join about 25 or 30 cockatoos of various species all flying in the 2500 square foot enclosure. They really seemed to enjoy the good life but would still flock all over me when I entered the pen.

Of all the birds I've raised, I think the Blue-eyed Cockatoos were the most fun. They were also a great challenge due to idiosyncrasies of the pair. Also, it is better to have three or four pairs of a species to establish a firm breeding foundation.

Even now, years after retiring from the horse and bird farm, I get calls from people wanting a Blue-eyed Cockatoo — usually a female. Females are generally in very short supply as the males display the typical cockatoo aggression and often kill their mates.

Looking back, raising the 13 baby Blue-eyed Cockatoos brings me a great sense of satisfaction. But it was the pair itself that really wanted to make babies. I can't take any credit for that. Once I got a few hindrances out of the way, they did what comes naturally. Would that there were more pairs of the Blue-eyed Cockatoo in American aviculture. They are magnificent birds. 

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