



Looking at the World Through Rosie Colored Glasses

by Susie Christian
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As anyone who has ever been owned by a cockatoo knows, we can never expect to have clean glasses – but ask us if we care? Ounce for ounce, cockatoos have to be one of the most loving bundles of downy-soft feathers ever created, always ready to bow their heads for a human finger massage. They were designed with a built in itch to their heads, extending down the body and under their wing-pits too, for that matter – a phantom itch that we are expected to locate and tirelessly rub forever.

Of course I bred Cockatiels for 20 years and kept Eclectus as pets half that long but for some reason never considered a cockatoo of any kind to be my choice as a pet. Until one fateful spring day about five years ago when I cuddled my first baby Rose-breasted Cockatoos. They were probably six or eight weeks old and not quite weaned yet. There were two cages of them and they looked so cuddly and friendly, sort of like playful roly-poly puppies with big pleading eyes in the pet store window. I asked if I could hold one and when I took one out the other followed. I had never felt anything so soft in my whole life! They didn't know the meaning of the words, "Go back in the cage," and proceeded to cling to me until I figured out how to maneuver them back and get the door closed quickly.

Talk about unusual color! I always thought of cockatoos as being white. The Galah's combination of silvery gray back, wings, and tail against the stunning pink face, chest, and underparts topped off with a very light pink

"cap" has to be the richest combination of colors I have ever seen. Like something out of an early Elvis Presley color scheme – perhaps Elvis's '56 Cadillac would have been painted this pink and gray color combination.

I repeatedly returned to the Rosie cages during my visit, to hold them and stroke their incredible silky textured feathers. It was beyond my wildest dreams that any bird like that existed. The memories of that day made me save my money and count the months until the following spring hatch. I was focused!

The advice given me was to get a hen because they make better pets. I am not sure about that now, as I have had a male in the house with me for the last year and he is gentler than his wife. I now feel it probably depends on the individual bird's personality.

SHE came to live with me when she was about four weeks old, the typical baby parrot pincushion of gray feathers. She ate like a big bird and weaned herself in less than eight weeks. I even took her with me on an eight hour-long car trip to Reno when she was five weeks old. Great traveling companion! We had to find a few fast food stops that had hot water available for her formula and made some new friends along the way. The restaurant that thought we had lost it completely was at the top of Donner Pass, with snow on the ground and me in my T-shirt with a tiny squeaking baby bird,

asking for hot water. At least we didn't get locked up. She lived in a laundry basket that period of her life and climbed up the wicker side so she could watch the traffic go by.

What to name HER? For my mother of course, Gertie. Gertie birdy. Their hatch-days were only three days and 85 years apart. My mother loved pink and gray so much she painted the house gray with lavender trim. The bird matched the house. Small, gentle brown eyes, hair piled high on top of her head, regal bearing, mind of her own...yep – just like my mom. So Gertie birdy she became.

Gertie was quick as greased lightning from the start and no rubber tips on any stools were safe. Ditto for light and phone cords. They all got eaten when I wasn't looking, as well as the rubber backing on the throw rugs. She still remembers how to roll back the corners of the rugs and stand on them so they don't fall back into place, thereby giving her a forgotten meal of seed I missed with the vacuum.

I took her everywhere with me from the beginning and made sure her wings were trimmed in deeper toward her body because these are the feathers that make Rosies the strong flyers they are. They use the primary feathers in closer to their bodies to scoop the air and can fly well with a normal conservative wing clip. She went to the Post Office, friends' houses, stores that would allow her there, everywhere I went. I also would hand her to people and let her interact with them, which she still does with dignity and grace.

When she was about five months



Photo by Susie Christian

My year-old Rosies helping with breakfast.

old she began to talk. Gertie now says only a few words and in a high husky feminine voice, similar to mine. I believe the males learn to talk much louder, plainer, and clearer, but I have no complaints about the vocalizations because she will speak on cue. She will raise her foot and flex her toes in a wave when prompted to, along with the word "Goodbye" at the same time. Always ready to play along with the pat-a-cake rhyme she will hold her foot up to pat-a-cake until the whole rhyme is recited (by me). What she says best is her name "Gertie Birdie," and it comes out loud and clear many times a day.

Typical for a Rosie, she will cuddle with me in the evenings to have her head scratched and she hopes I last for 20 minutes worth. Then she goes to her own pillow beside me which is covered by a towel, re-arranges her feathers a while and goes to sleep. Smart cookie, she hangs her tail over the edge and "goes" only on the papers on the floor underneath. She rarely has an accident on me as I have always given her the opportunity to "go" in the correct place about every eight minutes. They learn that well and actually prefer not to have an accident.

Sometimes I swear I can see those mental wheels upstairs just whirring

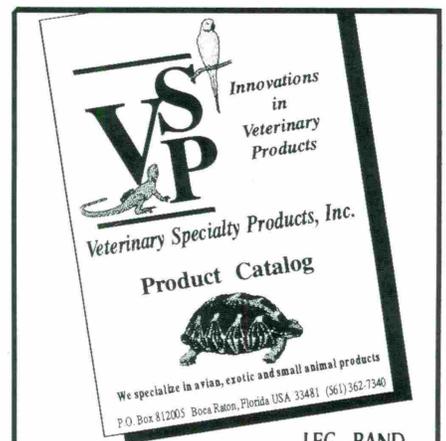
away. These birds are so quick and remember things with a mind like a steel trap. I sometimes try to fool her when we are out doing errands. She knows our truck very well and every time we walk down the street going past a line of cars I pass our truck, walk right by it and not even look at it. She strains each time and turns to look back and wonder why we don't get in. Impossible to fool her.

One great thing about Rosies is that they aren't as demanding as some other types of cockatoos. They do **Qn** and appreciate attention but if you get busy and don't have as much time for them for a day or two, they don't revert back to being wild and are much less likely to feather pick because of it. They seem to be able to amuse themselves better on their own and not get bored or dependent on their owners.

Proving that Galahs are like potato chips for me (you can't have just one), I added another pair of babies to my flock last year. I chose to house them in a large cage in the house with me for this first year. This was a brand new experience, raising a pair together. Nice to see them grow up being strongly bonded to one another but eager to interact with me as well. My mother would turn back flips in her grave if she

saw how the Rosies love flying around the high-ceilinged, football field-sized bedroom for a few laps, coming to roost upside down on the swag lamp chain. Funny little creatures, they are out of their cage much of the morning and if breakfast isn't ready on time they come waddling around the corner into the kitchen to find out why. They look like pink-pigeon-toed soldiers marching their way into the room, calling back and forth to their mate in the short little tones they use to communicate with one another. There is never a dull moment around here.

Having been a dyed in the wool Eclectus lover for a long time now, I sometimes wonder about my attraction to a bird that is as unlike an Eclectus as day and night. For me Rosies are like the pepper of salt and pepper. I love the intelligence, humor, attitude, animation and antics of the Rosies. My heart melts when I look at Gertie birdy as she puffs up her cheeks, tilts her head and presses her face into my hand for a head scratch. So what if my glasses are covered in cockatoo dust. My world couldn't be any Rosier! 



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