



Salmon-crested Cockatoo

(Cacatua molucensis)

By Rick Jordan

Photograph by Mark Moore

The Salmon-crested or Moluccan cockatoo is one of the largest of all cockatoos. It is a light pink color with a dark salmon colored recumbent crest. When excited, Moluccan cockatoos can bring the crest to a full vertical and even slight forward position on the top of the head, and force its facial feathers out creating a very large and intimidating façade in order to frighten off predators. Their beaks and feet are very strong and they require sturdy cages and aviaries or they will liberate themselves quickly and easily.

The Moluccan cockatoo or Salmon-crested cockatoo is endemic to Seram, Ambon, Saparua and Haruku, islands of South Maluku, Indonesia. They tend to prefer lowland (non-mountainous) forested areas where they often gather in flocks to eat or sleep. The diet of these wild birds reportedly consists of seeds, figs, fruits, coconuts, and insect larvae.

When I was fourteen years old I remember visiting the Dr.'s Pet Center at the Harrisburg East Mall in Pennsylvania. There, among the assorted breeds of puppies, was a kennel cage containing four adult wild-caught, Moluccan cockatoos- sitting side by side on a wooden perch. They swayed and hissed as I stood there enamored by their stunning beauty, and wondered what it would be like to have such a wonderful pet. Of course, at that time, working for \$1.25 an hour as an usher in a local theater, I had no way of attaining the \$1200 price tag needed to take one of these beauties home with me. I knew nothing about birds other than I found them amazing, both for their beauty and grace, and because of their interesting biology; after all, they come from eggs!

It was not until many years later that I found myself walking through Pet Farm, an import and wholesale facility in Miami, Florida. I came across an entire bay of Moluccan cockatoos, this time hundreds and hundreds of birds once again lined up on perches along the walls swaying and hissing at my intrusion. I simply had to take a pair of these home with me, and so, one of the very first breeding pairs of parrots I bought was an imported pair of Salmon-crested cockatoos.

By the mid 1980's aviculture was in high gear in the United States. Breeders were being established all over the country with the largest collections found primarily in the southern States, probably because the weather was warm and breeding birds could be kept out of doors all year long. I built my first large wire cage and hung my first home-made wooden nestbox for my new pair of Moluccan cockatoos. I was anxious to release

these beauties into the cage so I could look at them and marvel over their soft hues of orange and pink feathers. Out of the pet carrier they flew, and into the nestbox they went. I rarely ever saw them as they felt more secure in the dark nestbox. Since the food was disappearing, I knew they were coming out, but not when I was around to look at them.

If one were to ask a person that has kept or been around Moluccan cockatoos to use one word to describe them, the list would probably look like this: large, cuddly, loveable, loud, demanding, intelligent, smart, affectionate, destructive, talented, talkative, or adorable. From this list it is easy to see there can be “good and bad” in owning a Moluccan cockatoo. But for the most part, pet owners with this species say they would never part with their pet and most consider them part of their family. Unfortunately, some people “bought into” the cockatoo craze without doing their homework, and because of that there are some sitting in rescue facilities awaiting the right situation where they may be placed back into a pet home, or housed with a mate where they can breed and fulfill their natural instincts.

Breeding Moluccan cockatoos is not really that difficult when compared to many other parrot species. Usually any compatible pair supplied with an adequate cage, diet, and nesting box will produce fertile eggs. The fun begins when trying to get them to incubate the eggs, or rear the young. It seems that Moluccan cockatoos do not like any interruptions in the nesting process. Even a momentary glance into the box, once eggs are present, may be enough for them to abandon incubation or destroy the eggs.

Although this behavioral issue has created a need for many of their eggs to be artificially incubated and their chicks to be hand-reared in captivity, multiple generation successes are finally being reported with this species. In the boom years of aviculture, and before we knew any better, we would spoil baby Moluccan cockatoos in the avian nursery, probably because they are so damned adorable. But this led to a decade or two where our captive-bred birds simply were not the best breeders for second or third generation production. Male birds were aggressive toward their mates, and some females tended to eat their eggs rather than incubate them. Sometime in the late 1980’s aviculture began new practices when dealing with cockatoos; less time was spent spoiling young birds and more time was spent allowing them to socialize with other young birds. This has definitely resulted in better breeding results using hand-reared parental stock.

This species is rather active, although shy, and they do require a long cage in captivity. This is despite the fact that the keeper will probably rarely see the birds if they are provided with a nesting box. But when no one is around, even the shyest of pairs will exit the nesting box and fly back and forth from perch to perch. They are particularly vocal at dusk and into the night hours. On a full moon night, pairs housed out of doors can be heard vocalizing or producing their eerie screech for miles around. There are many stories from zoos and other keepers about how neighbors or others have reported “someone being hurt” when they hear the long drawn-out scream of a Moluccan after dark.

In the wild, Moluccan cockatoos have been experiencing a moderate to severe decline in population numbers since the mid 1980’s. They are

currently listed as vulnerable by Bird Life International, and were added to Appendix I under CITES in 1989. Metz and Nursahid report: “By the 1980s the species was being extensively and unsustainably trapped for the cage-bird market, with an estimated 74,509 individuals exported from Indonesia between 1981 and 1990, and international imports averaging 9,751 per annum between 1983 and 1988. Although reported international trade fell to zero in the 1990s, trappers have remained highly active and birds are openly sold within Indonesia.”

The Moluccan cockatoo is now listed as “threatened” under the U.S. Endangered Species act as well, but our U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has had the foresight to exempt it from the constraints of Federal Permitting usually needed for any interstate commerce with a listed species. This was accomplished, in part, due to the large outpouring of support from AFA members, pet owners and breeders in this country that asked for a “Special Rule” for the species if it were to be listed under the Act. Thanks to this special rule, breeders, zoos, exhibitors, and pet owners can still possess, move, sell, barter or donate Moluccan cockatoos in the United States without obtaining a Federal permit. This has helped those that are trying to establish unrelated pairs of this species to move birds between themselves and keep their bloodlines strong.

Keeping cockatoos as companions or pet birds is still common in the United States, but a decline in pet birds is being seen. This decline coincides with the decline in many companion animal species and may be a temporary phase. There is no question that cockatoos are demanding pets. They may be one of the most affectionate pets a person could keep as well. The key to keeping a well-adjusted pet cockatoo will probably be an enriched environment that helps to keep them occupied when the keepers are not around, and just the right amount of affection and interaction when they need it. Almost all companion parrots can benefit from toys, games, or other forms of enrichment in the cage, but it is vital to a pet cockatoo.

Although they are large, sometimes loud and demanding pet birds, the Moluccan cockatoo must continue to be a species of focus in U.S. aviculture. We cannot turn our backs on a species that is also fighting extermination in their natural habitats. Responsible aviculturists must begin to unfold the secrets and find the “best way” to preserve this species in captivity, be that in pet homes, or be it in zoos or other breeding/exhibit situations. Multiple generation successes with this species may be one solid hope for its restoration if and when the people of Indonesia and the Indonesian government decide to preserve its habitat and request the return of this species to the wilds of the future.

Metz, S.; Nursahid, R. 2004. Trapping and smuggling of Salmon-crested Cockatoos: an undercover investigation in Seram, Indonesia. PsittaScene 16: 8-9.

Tallulah

By Mark Moore

Having a budgie as a pet is common place for a child, as it was for Joan Straach of Texas. This initial interaction with birds at a young age helped inspire her aspirations as an adult to one day have a larger bird for a



Tallulah has changed the dynamics of Joan's home in a positive way. Here, Tallulah rests on Charlie's shoulder and poses for a picture. Top right, Tallulah shares her home with flamingo artwork. Bottom, Bob Saylor and Joan Straach.

companion pet.

So, let's fast forward several years to a special dinner party hosted by Mark Moore and Rick Jordan for the Jaguar Club of Austin, where over 60 members came for a sit-down dinner after the club's annual Turkey Drive in November. Our very own Andy Sanford prepared a marvelous barbeque. Joan along with all the attendees were given a tour of the newly expanded nursery of Hill Country Aviaries and the surrounding grounds. Little did Joan know how her life would change and her dreams realized after this simple party.

During the tour of the nursery, a rather precocious cockatoo caught Joan's attention and was eager to display her feathers and interact with all visitors. With a simple flip of the crest, Joan was enamored with the cockatoo's playfulness and delightful personality. After playing in the nursery and handling the bird and asking many questions, Joan decided that this was the type of bird for her.

Joan and I discussed at length the needs and requirements for such a pet and I promised her that the next chick we hatched would be set aside for her. (The weaning bird in the nursery had already been spoken for.) It wasn't but a few weeks and on December 11th a Moluccan cockatoo chick hatched and I called Joan with the joyful news. The name Tallulah was chosen long before the chick was fully feathered.

Over the next several weeks, Joan made visits to see Tallulah develop and to ask additional questions, many of which were raised by misinformation found on the Internet. We discussed housing, diet, training and all the parameters that would ensure an easy transition from my home to hers.

I helped Joan find proper caging for both her indoor and outdoor enclosures. Joan now happily updates me on Tallulah's shenanigans. Describing Tallulah as a puppy with feathers, she could not be more affectionate and loving, interacting with other members of the house as well as visiting friends and family members. (Bob may have a different interpretation.) Even the family dogs know they can expect a treat from Tallulah as she deliberately tosses tasty morsels of food to them.

Tallulah is extended free roam, although supervised, whereas any parrot can find themselves a little trouble. In Tallulah's case, she has modified a small section of the textured wall near her cage and playfully pulled the brass tacks out of the new leather sofa, and customized one or two pieces of wicker furniture. She likes shiny things. During the Wheel of Fortune, she competes with the volume of the TV and would prefer that she be the center of attention.

Joan admits that the dynamics in her home have completely changed, and to her delight. Tallulah has persuaded even the most skeptical to become an admirer and fan. Whether using her soft voice to whisper "Pretty Girl" or mimicking the barking of the dogs, she knows how to get one's attention. Tallulah is just as happy to share your morning breakfast of pancakes and scrambled eggs or your evening dinner of pasta. But, she would prefer the absence of the vacuum cleaner or the use of lawn equipment.

So, even though surrounded by flamingo artwork and sculptures, Tallulah is the top bird in her home.



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