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Breeding the Lesser Sulphur Crested Cockatoo

(*Cacatua sulphurea sulphurea*)

by Juliette Atkinson
Monmouth, Oregon

On July 12, 1980, we purchased a pair of lesser sulphur crested cockatoos from a couple who had had them for several years. The birds' ages were unknown, however it appeared they were mature, but not "old." They had been housed in a wrought-iron cage approximately 4' x 4' x 5' high. When I inquired as to their diet, I was startled to learn they had been fed sunflower seed solely, as the birds were in perfect feather. The previous owners had supplied them with a nest box (exact size unknown) and informed us the birds had chewed and entered it, but had never attempted actual nesting. The couple had frequently check the nest. The pair were held in a cage 6' long x 4' wide x 4' high. A ten gallon metal trash can "nest" was installed "just in case," and although the birds attempted to chew around the nest hole, not surprisingly under these circumstances, again no actual nesting was attempted. We found this pair, like our other pairs of lessers, to be very shy and secretive. In late April of 1983, they were transferred from southern California to our breeding farm in western Oregon. They were put into a fully enclosed but unheated aviary 12' long x 5' wide with the height being 10' on one end and graduating down to 8' at the other end. They were given a wooden nest 30" deep x 12" square. We had by then completely abandoned metal nests as we found them to be veritable "ovens" in the summer and "freezers" in the winter. They also did not provide the psychological stimulation of allowing the pairs to shape the nest

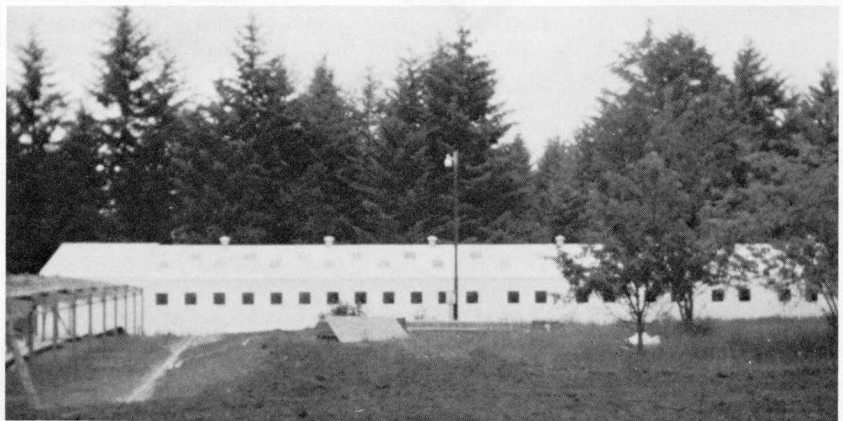
hole, a process which is as individual in each of our cockatoo pairs as is a signature to a human being.

In late May, they began entering the nest together, and remaining in it for long periods. Due to the extremely secretive nature of these birds, no nest inspection was made. On August 21st, I heard the sound of a baby cockatoo for the first time. This relieved my concern because for a couple of days prior to this, the pair had barely touched any food. This had coincided with the first egg hatching. They began eating a varied diet comprised of dry dog kibble, rolled corn, safflower, sunflower, canary seed, rat/mouse chow, apples, grapes, blackberries, carrots, spinach, and approximately fifteen walnuts per day. They were also consuming large amounts of their mineral block. Whole wheat bread was offered but not touched.

I made a very difficult decision to leave the baby(s) with the parents because of their good eating habits. The *easy* thing to do would have been to remove the young for hand feeding where I would have had control over diet, temperature, safety, etc. We are endeavoring, however, to allow as many of the macaw and cockatoo pairs to rear their own young in order to build up a source of domestically raised breeding stock for the future.

On August 30th, I was still hearing babies. The male would now come out of the nest to eat when I was in the building, but not before I was at least ten aviaries down the aisle from them. Fresh corn on the cob (one ear

Photo by Juliette Atkinson



The Atkinsons' original bird building housing the lesser sulphur crested cockatoos. New construction can be seen at the left.

per day) had been added to the diet, and this along with spinach were eaten first. They had stopped eating walnuts which I thought strange because of their usual love for them. Thompson seedless grapes were also favored, and they consumed approximately twenty to thirty per day. Only small quantities of seed were being eaten at this time. On September 8th, I noted the babies had changed sound — not so much soft cheeping as high pitched squealing and hissing. The parents were now consuming much more food, so I had to be careful to keep enough food in their dishes. Corn on the cob, grapes, greens, dog kibble, and once again walnuts were being favored. They were just now beginning to consume more seed (mainly sunflower). They also began taking a little apple which was previously ignored. I never ever saw both birds out of the nest at once, and most of the time both parents were in the box together. The male came out every evening around 5:30 p.m. His routine was exactly the same — stretch, threaten citron cockatoos next door, preen, fly, then down for a hearty meal. He was never noisy or vocal when out, perhaps, I thought,

so as not to draw attention to himself and the nest.

On September 15th, the pair was still remaining in the nest together most of the time. They were now eating large quantities (approx. 1/2 cup per day) of dry dog kibble, and grapes, corn on the cob, and walnuts still being the favored foods. During the previous weeks, there had been considerable commotion going on in and about their aviary building. Six aviaries at the far end of the building were being completed, an exhaust fan, fluorescent lighting, and rain gutters were installed on both sides of the 128-foot long building. A new 100-foot long building adjoining this one was being constructed resulting in continual comings and goings of workmen, cement trucks, rock trucks, lumber trucks, etc. Needless to say, I was concerned how the parents were taking all of it.

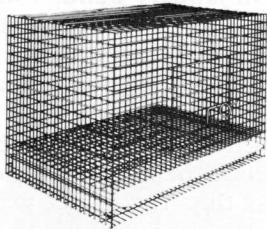
On September 28th, when I arrived at their aviary with the feed cart, I was shocked! The parents had chewed a hole through the bottom and corner of the nest (perhaps in a futile attempt to escape all the noise and commotion going on around them?), and there underneath the

nest sat two fat, bright-eyed baby cockatoos, rocking and hissing at me. Instant decision time! Take them and hand feed, or patch the nest and hope the parents would continue to raise the babies? The parents had done such a good job until then, I decided to patch and pray! The nest was patched while still hanging using two pieces of square metal. The babies were returned to the nest through the chewed hole and, during the whole operation, the hen would not leave the nest.

On September 29th, I was overjoyed to find both male and female in the nest, and the quantity and type of food consumed was per normal. On October 7th, I tip-toed up to the aviary building after dark, and peeked through the lessers' window — the male was out. I then saw the female peek out of the nest, look around, and come out also. Both birds were very affectionate towards each other. They greeted one another with bows, chirps, and wing spreading, then preened one another. On October 18th, I noted some decrease in the quantity of food eaten. "Could babies be in thinning-down stage?" I asked in my diary. On October 21st, I wrote,

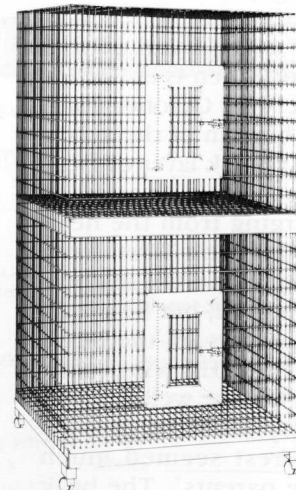
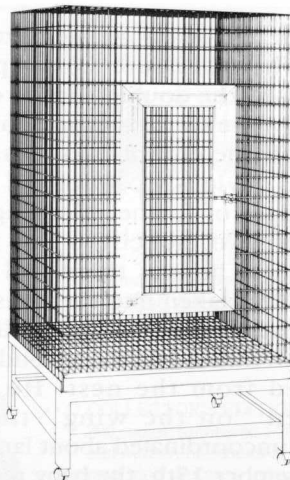
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A photo of a nine-week-old lesser sulphur crested cockatoo was chosen to illustrate the Atkinsons' article. The photo was entered into the 1986 Watchbird photo contest by Deborah Fountain of Redding, California. The young bird is readily identified by the pinkish coloring of the beak.

"There are new noises coming from lessers' box. Food eaten is definitely down in volume." On October 28th, we cleaned the bottom of the aviary and laid down a thick layer of fresh shavings in hopeful anticipation of something emerging from the nest. On October 31st, the first baby emerged. His flight and tail feathers were perfectly formed, but he exhibited a few pin feathers on the head, breast, legs, and back. His wings were very strong, and he flew well, but had a little difficulty coordinating his landings. His crest seemed much longer than the parents'. The beak was pinkish white with traces of light grey on the sides. The eyes were black in the middle, with a charcoal grey ring. I was slightly concerned as his head looked like it had been plucked.

On November 2nd, "Murphy's Law" struck us. The baby had appar-

ently been hanging on the wire at a point where pressure from a perch had caused the double wire to come together. The Congos next door had bitten off the end of two toes. The foot was obviously painful and there was danger of further bleeding and infection. No indecision this time! Murphy (as he was there and then named) was taken into the house for medical attention and hand feeding.

On November 5th, the second baby emerged from the nest. He, too, emerged "on the wing" though slightly uncoordinated about landing. On November 15th, the baby remaining with the parents was doing well, however, I was keeping a close eye on him due to the plucked condition of his head and breast, since night temperatures were falling to between 40 and 45 degrees F.

By December 3rd, the baby in the

aviary was healthy and eating well on his own, however, the nights were becoming increasingly colder. The parents were sleeping in the nest together, leaving the baby by itself, so I decided to pull him, now almost weaned, and put him with his nest-mate. He was at first very wild and difficult to feed, but in three days he became as eager for hand feeding as the other. We called him Magee. It was interesting to note the great size difference between the two babies. Magee was slightly more than half the size of Murphy. His head, feet, beak, body, etc. were perfect, just miniature replicas of Murphy's.

On December 17th, I noted in my bird diary, "After raising two young this year, pair has now taken to living in their nest box all the time." Although the food consumption was normal, I was slightly concerned, as we were hit by the "Siberian Express" two days before Christmas, and temperatures plummeted to nearly 0 degrees F at night, only going up to 16 degrees F or less during the day! After the third day, we managed to bring the temperature in the building to just at or slightly above freezing (32 degrees F). Much to my surprise, the birds all *thrived* (as opposed to merely survived) at this temperature, and we lost not so much as one tiny gold breasted finch in this building containing fifty aviaries! I was now better able to understand the success of European breeders. This unprecedented cold lasted over two weeks.

On January 22nd, 1984, I had not seen the pair out of the box since I had removed the babies. I therefore took down the box, and as I was lowering it I was stunned to hear the sound of a young baby! When I opened the lid, both male and female were fine. The female was in a corner with wings spread, sheltering the newborn, and beside her was another egg. Neither bird would leave the nest. On January 27th, I was still hearing the sounds of a baby being fed. January 31st was the last day I heard the baby. It died, most probably from being chilled, although I cannot say for sure. We gave the pair a second nest made of 2" thick plank, and this time three feet deep. Although "home" was still their drafty, old, patched box, they have been chewing around the hole of the new nest, and we hoped they would eventually feel this would be a better place to raise their next brood. ●

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