

Are you SURE you want a COCKATOO?

by Jenny Drummey

The first time I heard his scream my blood ran cold.



I was sitting in the bath, and Zeus the male umbrella cockatoo, the newest member of our flock, was settling on his parrot tower in the next room. We'd all just returned from Pennsylvania, where we had picked Zeus up from a rescue there and brought him home. He was 2.5 years old. We were his third home.

He screamed again and I shrank a little into the warm water. What had I gotten myself in to?

With their gorgeous plumage and expressive crests, their deep, soulful eyes and piercing intelligence, and especially their reputation as cuddlers, a cockatoo's marketing is his own worst enemy. These infinitely appealing birds come with as many problems as they do delights, unless you know how to handle them. They are like alcohol, for cockatoo owners develop a tolerance for the bird's extreme behavior that would leave a teetotaler woozy.

Case in point: Try to have a conversation while one, or more, cockatoos is screaming. While those who live with the 'toos, or other loud birds, have come to understand a conversation by every third word, a novice will spend the time saying "What? What?"



The Story of Butters

When Phoenix Landing went to pick up Butters, the male Moluccan cockatoo, from his relinquishing home, we found a bird who had lived in a large plastic storage bin instead of a cage for seven years. He was in a cramped, smoke-filled trailer, and fed a horrible diet. Butters was fostered in a nursing home for a while, but his screams became too much for the seniors, so he went to stay with a Phoenix Landing foster family, Sharon and Andy.

Butters shared a room with Sharon and Andy's parrots, and was well-cared for and loved while awaiting his adoption home. Sharon discovered that Butters preferred her over Andy.

In fact, "Butters will attack men, including Andy. But Peaches, our other Moluccan, prefers Andy, so it just depends on the individual bird." Sharon said.

Eventually, Butters was adopted by Charles and Jen and their family. They had lots of experience with birds, and had other birds in their home, including an umbrella cockatoo. "Every bird is different, but their differences give insight into all of them," Jen said. The family did their homework beforehand, educating themselves about the challenges that await, but there were still problems from the start.

First, it was excessive screaming. Jen said: "If a bird is crying for a reason, that's ok. But Butters kept going and going. I couldn't understand why, except that he wanted attention." But giving attention to a cockatoo can be tricky. Jen learned that "it's really important not to over stimulate a bird. It's human nature to take something soft and stroke it and give it affection. Birds are very independent, and they don't pet each other in the wild. We had to learn when to put Butters down.

"I noticed that when his feet got too hot, it was time to put him back in the cage. I loved to stroke and preen him. Probably the real problem started when I held him too long, got too close to him. You must limit your petting time, and do it in small spurts." Jen said. Though Butters became attached to Jen, Charles could hold him. However, after a series of bites from Butters, one close to Charles's eye, and another bite to their son, Butters had to return to his foster home.



Cockatoo Survival Kit

- Ear plugs
- Neosporin
- Band-aids
- Gauze
- A towel
- Aspirin
- Patience pills
- A clicker and the book *Getting Started Clicker Training for Birds*



Jen still misses Butters: "If he was the only bird I would have worked with him and worked with him but it would have taken a lot. By being in my home, he is doing me the favor, because Moluccans really belong in the wild."

Butters returned to Sharon and Andy's house. There are no hard feelings, and Butters even came to visit Jen and Charles with his foster family for Thanksgiving this year. Jen's advice for cockatoo owners:



"The bigger the cage the happier the bird. They love to chew wood. Give them lots of soft wood toys, boxes, crumpled up paper, balsa wood, phone books or a thick book.

"Umbrella cockatoos are great birds. You give them love and affection and they give it right back. But Moluccans belong in the wild."

When Butters returned to Sharon's house, she felt he had "loosened up some, and could now show his true colors. He can scream. And I don't mind. It's part of the deal when you get a cockatoo.

"Butters needs a special home, preferably with a single woman, and a home where he can see what's going on, because if you leave him alone, he screams. He spent the first seven years of his life seeing everyone in that trailer, so that's what he's used to.

"People have to expect that cockatoos will get excited and that's when they bite. You can read a cockatoo's body language 90% of the time. It's that other 10%, especially with the males, that you have to watch out for when they can get over stimulated and suddenly bite. It might not be sexual, the bird might just be playing."

Sharon offered more advice for those interested in cockatoos: "People have to choose to educate themselves, but you also have to watch what you read and what you hear. It depends on the individual bird. People need to understand that if they get a baby bird, once the bird reaches sexual maturity, it's not going to act the same. Anyone interested in cockatoos must just learn to handle them.

"Butters is a wonderful bird, a people person, very social. He loves to ride in the car and visit others." But for all his charm, Butters, like many cockatoos, is still looking for a permanent home where he can be understood.

Fear of the Beak

If you own a bird, you will be bitten at some point. It may not be a big deal, or it may be terrifying. This mostly depends on the size, and the power behind, the beak. Cockatoo beaks are especially intimidating, and if you've ever watched a 'too bite into a walnut like she is eating an apple, or take chunks out of a wooden table leg with minimum effort, you'll understand why the beak is to be respected.



I've had numerous bites from my cockatoo, each one extremely painful, and it has left me with scars on my arms, hands, and nose. But still, I love the bird and will not give him up. I've had many people tell me to get rid of the bird, people whose opinion I valued and trusted and would normally follow. So why does Zeus still have a home with me?

Because of the birds I care for, he is the one who needs it most. He needs tolerance, patience, and good nutrition. He needs a large cage with abundant toys and foraging opportunities. He needs time out for a game of catch, or just to hang out with the family. He needs to eat breakfast and dinner with us on the table, and he needs to jump and scream and act crazy.

He needs to be a cockatoo, and I will do my best to let him. It is not an easy job. Are you sure you're ready?



Cockatoo Questions

Ask yourself these important questions before taking a cockatoo into your home. For a complete list of questions compiled by Wendy Kiska, see our Web site soon.

Are you aware that cockatoo dander/dust is extremely thick and may cause long-term health issues if the bird's environment is not continually cleaned?

Are you aware of the monetary cost associated with keeping a cockatoo adequately entertained and occupied? Buying non-destructible toys is not a solution - the cockatoo will not play with a toy if it cannot be destroyed or taken apart.

If you have children and allow them to handle the bird, A cockatoo will bite your child at some point - inevitably, ALL birds have the potential to bite. Are you prepared for this day? How will you react?

Are you aware and prepared to listen to a cockatoo scream for extended periods of time? Are you also aware that your own hearing may one day be impaired as a result?

ASK THE VET

In our column, "Ask the Vet," an avian vet answers your questions about specific medical issues. If you have a question you'd like to see addressed in a future issue, email us at phoenixlanding@earthlink.net.

Q: What are stress bars on a bird's feathers and what do they indicate?

The translucent lines frequently seen across the vane of a feather are referred to as stress bars. These abnormalities represent abnormal development of the barbs and barbules of the feather at the level of the epidermal collar. These marks may be induced by corticosteroids suggesting that stress does play a major role.

Prolonged physical restraint, serious illness, and exposure to environmental extremes may induce these feather lesions. Diets deficient in essential amino acids such as arginine, riboflavin, and selenium have also been shown to cause feather abnormalities. As a clinician, I see these lesions mainly in birds on an all seed-diet or individuals from extremely stressful situations.

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