

## COCKATOOS AND ME

By Shauna Roberts

I'm checking my calendar; it does show January, winter time right here in the US, does it not? My male umbrella cockatoos are acting as though it's spring nesting time. Historically over the past 19 years my flock has started with what I consider spring activity, meaning they are acting hormonal. I suppose they are right to start early; however, in preparation for spring? If you haven't already asked the good question, what does hormonal look like? This is because without definition "hormonal" is just another one of hundreds of labels that don't tell us anything about what a bird is actually doing. Labels are something that we might say and animal "is" but it doesn't tell us what behavior/s we are seeing them "do". For my flock hormonal looks like this: Birds are very involved in w playing in their paper bags or boxes on the bottom of their cages. Yesterday I laughed when I said good morning to Niles, one of my U2's, as he sat crouched on a perch with wings slightly out. Niles had chewed off a piece of brown paper bag, wadded it up somehow, taken it up to the perch and had it situated under his body as if it were an egg.

Four of the five male cockatoos have bags or boxes in the cage, but the fifth bird gets wood to chew from hanging toys, and no box. The reason for this is that anytime of year he has been given a box, he ends up out of control. OK...another label! "out of control" That means he likely won't come out of his cage but just click and clack in the box when asked. If a person walks by he may lunge, if you stand too close he may pull your clothes or hair; he will scream excessively at times. We've all seen small children that are overly tired and scream when asked to go to bed. This example sort of describes Winnie's behavior if he's given a box, then he's out of control which is neither good for us or him.

The other male Umbrellas scratch like chickens inside their boxes. It looks and sounds pretty funny as they move their feet back and forth with such force and determination. And of course they chew, chew, and chew; there just doesn't seem to be enough wood on the skewers to last them an entire day. They can go through amazing 16-24 board feet a day of 4" wide planks. It gives them a project (and us too) and helps burn up a fair amount of energy.

The 'toos do these sorts of things all year round but it's different right now. What is different is how much more they are involved in their work. But there's more: There's the sweet side, the part where they become clingy. Ever try ungluing a cockatoo from a woven sweater? And when one male gets attention such as "hello", a little head preening, the one nearest him stops any nest building, rushes to the nearest perch and starts saying "I love you" and cooing. It's time to say good night and then the males all start saying "hello", "I love you", or running back and forth to play the game that they know I'll come play with them, "I'm gonna get you". Suddenly they all want me to be right there by them, melt in my arms when I take them out. That "love" is a warning sign for me to say be careful, hormones are rising so it's a time when these guys can be volatile. Volatile meaning they *might* be more prone to bite unexpectedly. With all of the warning signs and my being aware of this time of year, I haven't been bitten in several years. Living successfully with cockatoos is all about knowing the signs of their behaviors, the environment and about our individual birds and arranging the environment for their success.

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