

Cockatoo Romance or Aggression: When It Doesn't Work

By Shauna Roberts

Dark alluring eyes, a powder-scented perfume, pristine white feathers, a head dress extraordinaire and a shake of a tail feather all nestled under my chin with a voice cooing sweetly to me. That's how many of us might view the reason to add a cockatoo to the flock. Yet years later those same cockatoos find themselves without homes while the population of relinquished cockatoos continues to grow. That population of a bird once loved and most often still loved but unable to live with it...cockatoos are no longer referred to as a sweet and wonderful companion birds; they're labeled biting, screaming, hormonal, mean, and aggressive terrorists that can be dangerous to those who love them. That number tends to increase dramatically around early spring every year. Historically, trouble with a cockatoo may start from mid December through the end of March. It appears to be a time when many birds' hormones increase and depending on the home environment the birds are provided, caregivers may or may not experience behavior problem.

I have lived with cockatoos since 1995 and currently have 7 Umbrella cockatoos, 5 of which are male, and 2 female and plus 2 Moluccans in my flock and will always be in the learning stage. I so see some changes in the cockatoos' behavior during this time as well but it has not been a problem for us. I assume that it the result of providing an enriched environment where they are given projects (various toys, foraging, bags/boxes for the males), daily exercise, a good diet and continual positive reinforcement of desired behaviors. For me it is interesting to see the birds' energy levels rise with increased chewing or wood, singing, chatting and other antics such as flapping upside down, hopping on cage floors, shaking heads, raising crests and just being extra silly. My 'Toos have taught me to watch for changes in their behaviors because at certain times they are more volatile making them more prone to biting, lunging or maybe even screaming. Signals such as putting a foot up to say STOP, turning their backs to me when I get close or moving away slightly if I happen to touch them, being obsessed with make spit balls for hours, becoming very clingy. If I don't pay attention to these changes I could possibly be bitten. When I see these really clear or sometimes subtle signs I become more cautious than usual. If I take a bird out I may have a towel close at hand just in case a calm moment suddenly turns into an overload state where birds become overly excited and more prone to bite. A huge caution flag with most of my guys is if they get clingy which isn't normal behavior for the birds in my flock because they are most often independent and keep themselves very busy with their projects and also observing each others projects.

Favorite projects vary some per bird but most of the guys stay very busy chewing wood and playing in a boxes or brown paper grocery bags. They go inside the bag or box and arrange the chewed wood pieces and pop heads out to say Peek a boo! Another enjoys weaving chains, rope, leather or shoelaces through his cages bars and then sticks wood into gaps.

What about the people whose birds are always cuddly and clingy? What if someone hasn't set the environment up and now wants to fix the problem? I've often pondered why my flock gets through this time so well when at the same time I'm contacted by so many people asking for help because their birds are biting them or other family members. My answer is the environment that I have provided the birds that includes giving the flock continuous positive reinforcement throughout the year for all the behaviors I want them to do such as sitting quietly, chewing their toys, flapping their wings, singing, staying on the play gym and other desired behaviors.

Although I thoroughly enjoy snuggling a cockatoo, I make certain that any snuggles and cuddling with them lasts only about 5 seconds on average for each bird when I get to hug and tell them I love them! We do this once or twice a day. The only time that wild mature cockatoos (and other wild parrots) really snuggle another bird's body is during copulation. Young cockatoos and other parrots will snuggle as hatchlings and chicks for warmth and safety. Prior to copulation, cockatoos generally exhibit a great deal of preening, beaking and mutual feeding, using their beaks to groom and touch each other. Remember too that in the wild, these birds have large areas from which to claim their territory and set up a nesting site. Males usually exhibit breeding behavior prior to the females, which probably helps stimulate the female's breeding behavior. But the energy expended in the wild is critical to survival and it is very different than the life of a captive male cockatoo confined to a cage or play area for hours during the day, with little fresh air and natural light, who is often not given the early tools for cockatoo success, and who is usually fed an inappropriate diet and has been petted and stroked for hours on end. Most of us grew up with dogs and cats that do fine with us petting and touching them all over their bodies, but that same action stimulates a parrot in a different way. For a mature bird it becomes sexual behavior. Other than

cockatoos, most parrots don't tolerate the petting well. In fact, one of the pitfalls of getting a cockatoo is that so many people say that they want a bird that they can love and pet all day... If the birds could only say "No"! (other than by biting or lunging) cockatoos might avoid some of the problems that cause them to lose their homes. Since they don't often say no until it often becomes too late, it's up to us to do it for them.

Cuddling isn't the only potential problem in living with a cockatoo. Providing enough activity for a healthy cockatoo to burn up daily energy and provide mental stimulation is essential. I provide my 4 of my males Umbrellas with boxes, plenty of wood and foraging materials, and bags which they work at for several hours a day arranging these materials to their satisfaction. When ever I enter the room, it seems almost to me that they enjoy it when I walk over to their nest and they appear to show it off. This daily activity has proven to help calm these four bird. But, for the fifth male this doesn't work AT ALL. If he has a bag to play with he goes totally bonkers with excitement and he may lunge or bite at me. Instead he gets plenty of the types of toys he's most interested in: Toys with sliding parts and things that can be woven into cage bars or around other toys.

Recently, I was contacted by a distraught cockatoo owner whose bird was chasing the entire family throughout the house and biting. She had been given one piece of advice by another behavioral consultant just a few hours prior which was to take the bird's foraging bag out of the cage. The chasing and biting activity escalated during the next few days after that bag was removed and by the time the woman contacted me to consult she said Cockatoo had to be out of the house that day. Amazingly, after a quick intervention a home was found. The new home gave a brown grocery bag back to the bird so that it kept itself busy again building a nest along with other activities such as daily walkabouts, clicker training sessions and interacting with the new family and also diet was improved. The result wasn't a chasing and biting bird as the previous home, instead the bird was calm. Not chasing or biting. If we ever take something away from a birds environment we should also consider what else can be offered to the bird as enrichment rather than only thinking in terms of taking items away from the bird. If all we do is take away escalated or different problems could arise such as what happened in the case of this Cockatoo when the bag was taken away and his chasing, lunging and biting behavior increased in the days ahead.

Providing a healthy environment means a healthy diet fed in a species-appropriate amount twice a day. This means not over feeding but feeding what the bird eats within in an hour and its weight continues to stay the same. Other critical factors are: 10-12 hours of nightly quiet/dark time, the largest cage possible outfitted with perches and projects but not over-crowding the parrot; daily exercise activities such as walkabouts, flapping or flying, outside time weather and bird health permitting, and having things that are of interest to the bird, such as toys and daily foraging opportunities daily. An excellent task is to learn to train desired behaviors from your bird by using positive reinforcement. Frequent and varied bathing opportunities are enjoyed by many cockatoos and offer a positive diversion.

Overall learn to enjoy and respect your cockatoo for what it is: A feathered creature that is nothing like a human. Teach it to be a bird and enjoy the differences between bird and human while cherishing this relationship. My tip: Never force a cockatoo (or any other parrot) to do anything. Teach yes, force no. If you continue to force your bird with any behavior, you will surely be bitten at some point – and that is not a welcome behavior for bird or human.