

9 Steps To Avoid “Unwanted Cockatoo Syndrome”

Follow these steps for a healthy relationship with your bird

By Rebecca Sweat

Do your research before you decide to make a cockatoo a part of your flock.

1. Educate yourself about cockatoos — before you make the decision to buy one. Realistically assess your lifestyle, personality and household situation. Find out what you need to know about caring for a cockatoo, and be aware of the potential problems you might face.

“If you have an idea of what’s going to happen, you can be prepared for these situations,” said aviculturist and cockatoo specialist Katy McElroy. “People who buy a cockatoo knowing what they’re getting into — even if they don’t believe it could possibly be that bad — usually do a much better job with the bird, and there aren’t any major surprises.”

2. Look for a young cockatoo that has been raised to be independent and taught rules for living with a human “flock.” Because cockatoos are needy, McElroy believes they often do better with people who are less needy. “People who love the independence of macaws and Amazons usually do beautifully with cockatoos,” she said. “So many people buy them because they want this super cuddly teddy bear, but they don’t teach the cockatoo anything else.”

3. If you’ve decided that a cockatoo is for you, choose the largest cage you can afford. McElroy recommends a minimum 24-inch-deep by 36-inch-wide cage for one of the smaller cockatoo species, such as Goffin’s, and a minimum 30-inch-deep by 48-inch-wide cage for the larger cockatoo species like umbrellas and Moluccans.

“If you have them in a very large enclosure with lots of ways to exercise,” said Sam Foster, an avian consultant specializing in cockatoo care and behavior, “they can take out their frustrations by ripping and shredding and bouncing around inside their cage where they have lots of room — rather than you trying to resolve the issue when they get out of their cage, and they’re chasing you around the room.” This is especially helpful when you’re dealing with a hormonally charged male cockatoo, she said.

4. Cockatoos need to feel part of a flock. So put the cage in your living room or other high-traffic part of the home, where the cockatoo can be a part of daily activity. Don’t put your cockatoo in a room by itself where it will feel isolated (unless it is in a separate, for-sleeping-only-cage at night).

5. Supply your cockatoo with a wide variety of good-quality parrot toys. “Cockatoos love to play with their toys if they know how to do so,” said bird behavior consultant Michelle Karras. Show your bird what the toys do. Play with the toys yourself, and then see if your bird will follow your lead. Your cockatoo must learn how to amuse itself, so that it doesn’t always need you around to be happy.

6. Feed your cockatoo a proper diet. Most veterinarians recommend a fortified pelleted-base diet, supplemented with cooked or raw vegetables, as well as some fruit, seeds and nuts. Be careful about feeding foods high in sugar or carbohydrates.

“Diet has a huge impact on behavior,” Foster said. “If you’re feeding a cockatoo a diet that’s high in carbohydrates or sugar, even natural sugar, the bird is probably going to be a lot more vocal and hyperactive — especially if it does not have enough outlets for exercise to burn up that energy it’s getting from the food it’s eating.”

7. Plan on at least 15 to 20 minutes of rigorous exercise with your cockatoo everyday. Accustom your bird to wearing a harness and leash and take it outside for walks. Play a game of toss, fetch and catch with your cockatoo using a soft, lightweight object such as a Koosh ball or soft, stuffed toy. Teach your cockatoo to play basketball using a birdie-sized Nerf basketball hoop.

“When cockatoos get in enough exercise, they’re easier to live with because they don’t have all this excess energy to use up by screaming and carrying on — and they’re more content to just relax in their cage,” Karras said.

8. Karras also believes that cockatoos should be taught a designated time when it is OK to scream, and then plan to have this “scream session” for the same time everyday. “Cockatoos have a real need to be raucous,” she said. By having regular scream sessions, “your cockatoo learns that it’s OK to make noise at a certain time. He’s able to get rid of excess

energy, and you have control of the screaming.” A good time to do this is between 3 PM and 7 PM — before you are ready to wind down and relax in the evening.

To teach a scream session to your cockatoo, wait for when the bird begins to vocalize. Make sure it is within the time range when you want to encourage vocalizing.

“Before the bird is actually in a full-fledged scream and is just being vocal, put on some music that you know the bird likes, and literally blast it and get the bird going. The bird will start dancing and showing off and then start to scream,” Karras explained. “Play a song two or three times in a row, and then switch over to softer music and then lower it and then start talking the bird down and telling it that now it’s going to be quiet time and to settle down.” Offer some fresh food afterward.

9. Finally, establish limits and boundaries for your cockatoo. Be consistent in enforcing those rules. “You have to have enough of a spine to be willing to take a cuddly Moluccan cockatoo off your lap and put it on a T-stand, and make it spend some time on its own away from you,” said avian veterinarian Brian Speer DVM, co-author of *Birds for Dummies* (IDG Books, 1999).