

Major Mitchell's Cockatoos in "Harry's" Aviaries

Lloyd Marshall, Northbridge, Western Australia

Very few people in the US keep Major Mitchell's cockatoos.

They are expensive and their well-deserved reputation as hen-beaters does not make them an attractive breeding proposition.

These gorgeous birds do not make good long-term pets – they are fine for a few years after being hand-raised, but when they near breeding age at around four years they become aggressive, biting and scratching.

Probably the most beautiful cockatoo in the world, the Major Mitchell's – also known as the Leadbeater's can be very frustrating to keep. So why would anyone bother to keep more than 100 of them?

"It's simple," said a West Australian aviculturist who for security reasons I'll call Harry Moore, "I love them and breeding them is a great challenge."

Harry's nine-acre property outside Perth, the Western Australian capital, also houses many other Australian parrots as well as some Alexandrines.

A bird keeper for around 30 years, Harry moved to his present home 22 years ago, bringing with him 30 10-foot x 3-foot aviaries as well as a 30-foot x 15-foot flight.

Those enclosures now house pied and normal Hoodeds, Barrabands, blue and normal Princess, eastern Kings, western Kings, Crimson-wingeds, Yellow Rosellas, Cockatiels and Alexandrines.

He also has Rainbow, Red-collared, Scaly-breasted and Musk Lorikeets as well as a few transient Budgies, which come and go via the large mesh on the three cockatoo

aviaries which butt onto his 30' x 15' mixed parrot aviary.

Major Mitchell's have a special place in Harry's heart and soon after building his home and moving in he started work on a bank of 20 aviaries specifically designed for them.

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Each cage is 28 feet deep, six feet wide and eight feet high with frames made from one-inch and one-and-a-half-inch galvanised steel tubing, with one-inch tubing used for the doors.

Two-inch chain mesh wire is used throughout and the back wall is metal cladding, with the rear eight feet of the roof covered.

Seed trays and nesting logs are in the covered section and three of the aviaries have been sectioned into 14-foot x 6-foot flights to provide more accommodation.

Asked why there was no metal sheeting used on the dividing walls adjacent to the nesting/feeding area,

Harry said he tried it and it caused problems.

"You'd think that, being a very territorial bird, they would go better if they couldn't see the neighbouring nests," he said, "but that's not the case.

"I don't know if the movement of the tin rattled them or if it was the noise made by mice on the tin, but something upset them and they breed better without it."

The birds like to roost at the front of the flights at night, so there is a three-foot covered section there as well.

Each flight has two perches – one towards the back of the covered section and one at the front of the flight.

"This provides them with plenty of space to fly, which is important to keep them in good condition," Harry said.

Numbers of majors in each flight vary from one pair to six birds – usually a pair with youngsters – some pairs are happy to share accommodation while others insist on having their own private quarters.

One flight contains a pair of Majors and a pair of one-year-old Red-tailed Black Cockatoos, which Harry hopes to breed from when they mature at four years old.

Six of the aviaries also contain pairs of eastern Kings, which get on well with the majors.

"Most majors won't go into the six or seven-foot-long logs used by the Kings," Harry said, "although occasionally one will, sometimes attacking the young Kings.

"Some of the majors also have a go at the young Kings through the wire, playfully trying to nibble their feet."

Harry uses nesting logs for all his birds, with the length varying from up to seven feet for the Kings, three to four feet for the Majors and smaller sizes for other species.

He puts wood dust mixed with a small amount of charcoal to a depth of four or five inches in the bottom of each log.

A tall man, Harry inspects all except the King nests from the top.

"The kings have small inspection doors cut at the bottom," he said, "because my arms can't reach down far enough."

There is no set breeding age for Major Mitchell's with some of Harry's going down at two years and others reaching seven years and showing no inclination to breed.

They are extremely fickle birds, with males sometimes turning on long-term mates for no apparent reason.

"Whenever I see two birds on the ground for longer than usual, I know there's trouble," Harry said, "and it's usually a case of the male chasing the female down there so he can beat her up more easily."

He has had cases of birds laying and incubating then deserting the young when they hatch.

"They sit beautifully, but when the first egg hatches the two of them sit outside the log, crests raised in alarm," he said.

"It's as though they don't recognise the babies and think they're rats or mice."

Harry doesn't like hand raising, preferring to let the parents do the job.

"But in cases where they've been deserted and I don't have another pair where I can place the chicks, I take them in," he said.

He pulls eggs from pairs that have a history of abandoning chicks and places them under good parents.

Half of Harry's birds are youngsters and he believes his breeding results will improve now that he has stopped work and has more time to spend with his birds.

"But I still won't pull eggs or chicks unless it's absolutely necessary," he said.

"They are a beautiful looking bird, but they don't make good pets, because when they reach breeding age they start to bite, but many people still want them because they are so pretty."

Some of Harry's birds that remained semi-tame when they matured give him a nip occasionally but there's no way he'd part with them.

"I love the birds too much," he said, "I suppose you could say they are my addiction."

Some of his birds lay fertile eggs, but don't sit.

"With them I pull the eggs, give them infertile eggs, then incubate the real eggs and switch them back to the parents or another pair when they pip," he said, "and then they raise the chicks beautifully."

Occasionally swapping Majors with other breeders to introduce new blood, Harry knows the history of every one of his birds, which aviary it's been in, what it's unique characteristics and problems are and how it has interacted previously with its mate and neighbours.

"If a bird is a problem I move it," he said, "taking into account its behaviour pattern as well as the characteristics of the bird I'm going to put it with."

Some birds are consistently good, some consistently bad and some downright strange.

"I have had pairs which have bred well for several seasons, then the cock bird killed one of the young but raising the three other nestlings.

"I have also seen a cock raise three nests of young with a hen in three years, then start attacking her in the fourth year, with no breeding result that year," Harry said.

"I then put him with another hen where he produced seven young from two nests in two years before he attacked that hen in the third year."

The cock is now with another hen, which is laying well, even though the cock occasionally gives her a hard time.

To assist hens that are being attacked Harry leans a chain mesh gate or a piece of bird wire against one of the aviary walls to give them somewhere to take refuge from the cock.

"It's impossible to figure out, pairs can be in the same cage with the same log, same neighbours and be doing well for a long time," he said, "then for some reason things start to go wrong." ❖

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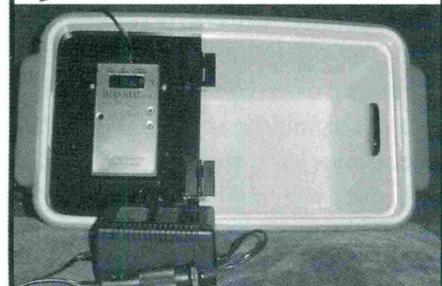
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