



Pair of Umbrella cockatoos.



When Love Hurts

MATE AGGRESSION IN COCKATOOS

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We thought we had set up every security line for her. We slowly introduced her to her new mate by putting a wire divider in the aviary. We installed the perches so that they could sit side by side during the night. We observed how they interacted with each other and were happy when we saw how gentle and friendly the male was. The offspring was a healthy and happy little bird. We always had in our mind that cockatoos can get aggressive and that males sometimes kill the females. But nothing prepared me for the phone call that evening: "He killed her this morning. We tried to rescue her but when we arrived at the vet she was dead." Silence.

As a behavior consultant my first goal is to make sure that every bird is safe, secure and in good health. Had I made a mistake when I guided this owner? Had I forgotten something, not seen a sign, misinterpreted the body language? Where did I fail? I do not know. Mate aggression in cockatoos is something that nobody likes to talk about. When you see the pictures of those feathered angels, the lovely face of an umbrella or a moluccan, you don't think that this could be a vicious killer from one moment to the other. And I still do not believe that there are killers, even if those males hurt or killed females. But I wanted to know more about this topic and so my journey began.

I tried to find articles about mate aggression but was not really successful. There are a lot of breeding articles, and sometimes you find a few sentences about this topic, but nothing that really helps or explains what happens in the mind of these birds. When I asked breeders, owners and veterinarians about this behavior, I noticed that Yellow-crested cockatoos (*C. sulphurea citrinocristata*), Umbrella cockatoos (*C. alba*), Philippine cockatoos (*C. haematuropygia*), and Moluccan cockatoos (*C. moluccanus*) were the ones most known to show this behavior. There were also a few Rose-breasted cockatoos (*Eolophus roseicapilla*) and Goffin's cockatoos (*Cacatua goffiniana*) known for attacking their mates. Therefore, I took a closer look at the habitat where those species live and what social structure they prefer in the wild. I realized that those species that are regularly known to attack females live in a forested area. Their social structure normally is a pair or a very small flock, not more than 10 individuals. Goffin's cockatoos and Rose-breasted cockatoos, even Little Corellas (*Cacatua sanguinea*) live in very large flocks in the open country where they can see other individuals very quickly, even if they are far away. So living in a habitat in small flocks or even as a pair in an area where intruders are not visible seems to influence territorial behavior and aggressiveness. However there must be more to understanding this behavior.

When I work with cockatoos I often notice that the less aggressive species seem to have a mating season. I know a lot of owners whose birds get on their nerves when mating season begins. But the owners of Umbrella cockatoos, Moluccan cockatoos, and some Yellow-crested cockatoos seemed to deal with the mating season all year round. OK. Step back to the habitat!



Moluccan cockatoo.



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Male aggression often results in catastrophic injury to the hen.

The seasons in the natural habitat of the more difficult species do not change so dramatically as in other habitats. It is warm all year round and rains nearly every day. The humidity is very high and the conditions are nearly all the same year around. Breeding could occur any time of the year. Thomas Arndt, a well known specialist of Asian cockatoos, asked the residents of Sulawesi whether they sometimes hear Umbrella cockatoos in the forest. He was told that the males scream all year round and so loud that you can hear it even if you are 3 miles away. Why would a bird see the necessity to scream so loud during the whole year? I believe that this screaming means: "Look, I am here, this area is taken, I have a mate and I breed here. If you dare to come too close be sure that we will have a hard fight!" Being aggressive, defending the nest cavity and the female seems to be essential to make sure that the offspring will survive.

But what about the females? Are they in the same elevated hormonal status all year round? What if their bodies need a rest after breeding? If this is the case and if the females leave the males after the breeding season for a short time they will not be in danger of being killed. There is plenty of space and they can flee if the males try to go after them. Leaving a strong, highly potent male near the nest gives the females the opportunity to come back, when they feel ready to breed again. And I suppose this is where our problems begin!

We keep our cockatoos in aviaries. Even if the aviaries are very big, they might be too small for the natural behavior of cockatoos in the mating season. As male cockatoos enter into the mating season the high level of hormones in their bodies will increase and maintain aggressive behavior. They try to mate with the female even if she is not ready and her hormones haven't taken her into the same hormonal status as the male. She will not be able to answer with the right behavior when the male tries to mate. In the wild she would be able to fly away, but in our aviaries there is no possibility for escape. The male might not be interested in a female that is not in the same breeding condition as he is. She will not raise his offspring and therefore should leave. You can imagine the rest.

This might be a simple answer to a very complex behavior, but for me it seems to be logical. However it does not solve the problem, nor does it save future lives, so I decided to ask more experts about this topic.

Walt Frey has bred cockatoos for more than 30 years. I met him at several AFA Conventions and heard his lectures about cockatoo breeding. His knowledge and tips are very valuable for this topic. He immediately answered my mail when I asked him what we can do to prevent further attacks towards females. His suggestion was to offer the birds an aviary that is minimum 5.5 meters x 2.3 meters x 2 meters, but bigger would, of course, be better. The owner should offer the cockatoos a minimum of two feeding stations which should be very far away from each other and, if possible, separated with a divider. There should be private zones with branches for the birds. The nest box should not be offered

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in the first month to give the cockatoos the opportunity to stay together without the encouragement to breed. Whenever there is the slightest indication that something is not ok, the owner should immediately separate the birds. Walt gave me an example: If the hen is on the ground and the male is calling with a spread tail, the hen would not be able to eat in peace. The male should be caught and put in a small cage until the female chooses to renew her contact with the male again. The nest box should be removed for a while, and the male should get a wing trim to slow him down.

Kashmir Csaky and Jamie Whittaker also helped with their experience. They recommended that the male's wings are clipped and a barrier with a hole in it that the female can fly to is placed between the nest box and the rest of the flight. She can go through the hole and the male cannot. Thick plants in the middle of the aviary might also help. This creates a donut-like area where the female can move in or hide. A tangle of branches at measured distances might also help. A mild clip will slow down the male, while the female can quickly fly to each section of branches and get through the maze. It will take the male longer to get to the branches, allowing her time to fly to the next set of branches while he is pursuing her. The thick plants in the middle make it harder for him to know where she is. Hopefully, he will become exhausted before he reaches her. Another opportunity to slow down the male is to put ladders in the aviary. If hung alternately they stop the birds from flying attacks. They can be gnawed on and used as branches and enrichment.

The best nest box is a V-shape with a flat base. The lobes of the V should be very high, and each lobe should contain an opening hole. There should be a divider in the middle of the V inside the box that is so high that the female has the opportunity to climb out of the other lobe when the male enters the box. A T-shaped box is dangerous, as there are corners where the male can trap the female and attack her.

Budgies and some of the other grass parakeets seem to notice minute changes in the male behavior and can alert us, and the female, that he is becoming agitated and possibly violent. If they are placed near the cockatoo aviary, they will make a ruckus when alarmed, and this might slow down the behavior of the male. That gives the owner time to intervene and rescue the female.

Bathing and showering the males gives the birds the opportunity to burn off some energy. It also slows down the males when they are wet.

Flocking young males together for a period of time also seems to reduce overall male aggression. This seems logical to me, as we all know that young parrots are educated by adult parents. Perhaps running riots with other fellows helps curtail the young males to burn some energy.


We all know that cockatoos are especially intelligent and that they suffer from boredom if we do not give them the



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opportunity to seek and forage for food. Even if it is a lot of work, I agree with my colleagues, Kashmir and Jamie, that those cockatoos that are prone to aggression should be fed through Contra-Free-Loading. If the female is in danger of not getting enough food, she can be fed separately. Working for food keeps the males busy, and they can spend their energy and intelligence by gnawing and manipulating toys.

When it comes to the feeding, we must keep in mind that the food consumption in the birds has a great influence on their behavior. High levels of fat and sugar give the birds the impression that there is enough food to successfully raise a clutch of chicks. Therefore, it might be of help if we feed the male a slightly different diet than the female. A balcony in the aviary where the male is fed, and that can be closed off to keep him there, also provides a good opportunity to clean the aviary without the

danger of being attacked by a territorial bird. As cockatoos are highly intelligent, the training with a target stick to show the bird where to go is easily accomplished.

What do we do with a cockatoo which has already killed a female? All experts agree that these birds should not be allowed to breed again. Attacks can occur in a second, and then it is too late to save the female.

The male of our pair lives now in a shelter with other cockatoo males that have killed their mates. He is happy and has found some buddies. The offspring of the pair is a big and sweet boy. Hopefully he will never show the same behavior his father showed.

We could not save her. That is something that I will never forget. But hopefully this little summary helps another female to survive. I keep my fingers crossed for her, wherever she is.

Special Thanks to Dr. Walt Frey, Kashmir Csaky (IAABC), Jamie Whittaker (IAABC)



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20 Things to do in Portland

FOOD & DRINK

1. There are over 500 street food carts in Portland
2. There are 31 microbreweries in Portland
3. Distillery Row for harder liquor
4. Oregon wine country tours
5. Tour the urban wineries and wine bars

NATURE

6. Forest Park – a jungle paradise 10 minutes from downtown.
7. International Rose Test Garden
8. Lan Su Chinese Garden
9. Crystal Springs Rhododendron Garden
10. Hoyt Arboretum

SHOPPING-NO SALES TAX!

11. Hawthorne: Fun, funky and independent
12. Belmont shopping – local fashion, coffee, souvenirs made in Portland
13. Division / Clinton – vintage fashions and antiques
14. Alberta Arts – art, books, music and boutiques
15. Sellwood-Moreland – lined with antique malls and independent stores

OTHER PLACES

16. Bridge tour – 8 unique bridges span the Willamette river in Portland
17. Powell's City of Books
18. Pittock Mansion
19. Oregon Museum of Science and Industry
20. The Pearl District – art and cultural center

25 Things you might not know about Oregon

1. Oregon has more ghost towns than any other state.
2. Oregon has no state sales tax.
3. Oregon and New Jersey are the only states without self-serve gas stations.
4. Eugene was the first city to have one-way streets.
5. At 329 feet the Coast Douglas-Fir in Oregon is considered the tallest tree in the state.
6. At 8,000 feet deep Hell's Canyon is the deepest river gorge in North America.
7. Oregon's state birthday is on February 14, Valentine's Day.
8. The "Oregon Pioneer" statue that tops the capitol building is a work by Ulric Ellerhusen.
9. The state park system has 159 yurts located in 19 parks. Yurts are a circular domed tent suitable for camping.
10. The Chinook salmon is Oregon's official state fish.
11. In 1880 a sea cave was discovered near what is now known as Florence. Sea Lion Caves is known to be the largest sea cave in the world.
12. The nation's most photographed lighthouse is the Heceta Head Lighthouse in Lane County.
13. The H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest is one of the largest long-term ecological research sites in the United States.
14. There are nine lighthouses standing along the coastline. Five are still being used; the others are designated as historic monuments.
15. Portland is an example of outstanding urban planning. The city is known as the City of Roses.
16. High above the city of Portland the International Rose Test Garden features more than 500 varieties of roses cultivated continuously since 1917.
17. At 11,239 feet, Mt. Hood stands as the tallest peak in Oregon. Mt. Hood is a dormant volcano.
18. Crater Lake is the deepest lake in the United States. It was formed more than 6,500 years ago. It is formed in the remains of an ancient volcano.
19. Discovered in 1874 the caves located in Oregon Caves National Monument are carved within solid marble.
20. The Carousel Museum contains the world's largest and most comprehensive collection of carousel horses.
21. The small village of Bickleton is filled with bluebird houses seen on the posts of every house.
22. The Oregon Trail is the longest of the overland routes used in the westward expansion of the United States.
23. Haystack Rock, off Cannon Beach, is 235 feet high and is the third largest coastal monolith in the world.
24. The Tillamook Rock Lighthouse, built in 1880, is currently used as the final resting place of up to 467,000 cremated individuals.
25. The Seaside Aquarium was the first facility in the world to successfully breed harbor seals in captivity.



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