

Behaviour issues

Moluccan Cockatoos

Truth or consequences

By KIM CALVERT

When I first moved to California I had a roommate with a wild-caught Moluccan Cockatoo (*Cacatua moluccensis*) named Coco. Coco liked to crawl under the covers with me in the morning. I never realized a parrot could be so affectionate. Fifteen years later, I saw one in a pet store and decided it was time to have a cockatoo of my own. I started with the classified ads, then considered adoption, then decided I wanted a young bird that hadn't been "ruined" by someone else.

It took six months of searching before I found Phoebe Linden at the Santa Barbara Bird Farm. Phoebe insisted I read her book on parrot care and do even more research. I finally passed Phoebe's screening and put a deposit on a three-week-old Moluccan, that still featherless, looked like a miniature pink dinosaur.

Mimi came home when she was five months old. Even after my recent cockatoo education, nothing could prepare me for the real thing. Life with a Moluccan Cockatoo; an amazing creature so incredibly beautiful, so emotionally complex, so intelligent, so energetic, so in need of social interaction; was akin to keeping a dolphin in a backyard swimming pool. Now I understand why these parrots were frequently surrendered to rescue organizations.

The fact that Moluccans are an endangered species made it even more disconcerting. CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild Fauna and Flora) lists Moluccan Cockatoos under Appendix One: extremely rare and threatened. Other animals on this list include tigers, chimpanzees and elephants. The treaty was created to protect high-risk species in their native countries. It does nothing to protect domestically bred Moluccans that are frequently sold to unprepared, impulse buyers who realize too late their cute, cuddly pet is actually a profoundly intelligent, emotional wild animal that only appears "tame" because of its flocking instinct.

Yet despite their endangered status and the rigorous demands of keeping a Moluccan happy in a human home, many top breeders defend this parrot's suitability as a pet. Dr. Walt Frey, A.F.A. member, President of the Cockatoo Society and cockatoo breeder since 1964, believes that "people have the right to own a pet parrot of whatever species they can afford to buy and take care of." He takes offence to what he describes

as a negative propaganda campaign about cockatoos perpetrated by "the PETA types." According to Dr. Frey, "These cockatoos are magnificent parrots and if I had to keep only one species of birds they would be Moluccans. They are beautiful, gentle and as satisfying a pet as possible."

Frey also acknowledged that educating customers was important, but did not wish to get involved in the education process himself. He sells exclusively to a small number of pet stores. "My shops do not encourage impulse buying but rather encourage the future owner to come in and play with their pet for some time before taking it home. All of these relationships will not work out and that's ok too. My shops will usually repurchase unwanted pets, sometimes to sell them again and sometimes to retire them on my farm."

Cockatoo breeder and A.F.A. member, Kelly Tucker of Tucker Farms in New Mexico, has bred Moluccan Cockatoos and a variety of other parrots for twelve years. She describes Moluccan cockatoos as "delightful, happy, entertaining and loving pets." Responding to questions about the future of these parrots Tucker said: "As aviculturists, we choose to accept the responsibility of helping to save Moluccan Cockatoos from extinction. It will be up to aviculturists to breed enough of these birds to preserve the species."

Terry Timberlake, sales manager at Florida's Avicultural Breeding & Research Center in Florida also thinks Moluccans can make good pets. In a telephone interview Timberlake said, "People love them. Everyone's begging for them. In an average year we sell 30 to 40, and we've sold 12 in the last few months." Timberlake said that ABRC educates their customers about the needs of this parrot. "If there's a problem with Moluccans its because the customers don't take the effort to educate themselves and the breeders



don't take the time to educate their customers."

Frey, Tucker and ABRC are considered quality bird breeders, but they are not the norm. Doing an informal survey among Moluccan owners in my local bird club, there seemed to be an abundance of not-so-pleasant experiences recounted by Moluccan owners.

For example, Linda Epperson found her Moluccan at the Pomona Bird Mart. The breeder told Linda the baby cockatoo would be weaned in two weeks. "He lied to me about the weaning process," Linda said. "He also told me I didn't need to take him to the vet. But I did. The vet said he was severely malnourished. If I'd followed the breeder's instructions he would have died."

Joan Duma purchased her Moluccan from a breeder in Riverside, California. She found the breeder on the Internet and drove out to see the babies. At first she wanted a macaw, but thought a Moluccan, being smaller, would be more "manageable." The breeder had no interest in Joan's lifestyle or her experience with parrots. She was sold an unweaned Moluccan on the spot. She described life with her cockatoo as equivalent to parenting a two-year-old child and has sought the services of a parrot behaviourist.

Lorrie Mitchell has two Moluccans: a 50-year-old male and a 25-year-old female. Both are wild-caught, so their ages are estimates. The male was rescued from a pet shop after being recycled through numerous homes. Long before he came to Lorrie's home, his wings were amputated at the last joint to prevent flight. The female came from a family that didn't have the resources to keep such a high maintenance

pet. Mitchell, who works with a Los Angeles Parrot Rescue, has personally removed severely neglected Moluccans from people's garages and basements.

Marc Johnson, who runs Foster Parrots, a large parrot rescue in Massachusetts said, "This year has been a cockatoo nightmare. These birds should never have been made into pets. They sell Moluccan Cockatoos like it's a cuddly bunny rabbit with feathers - as this really wonderful, ideal pet. There's no mention of the pitfalls that lie ahead."

According to Sybil Erden, who heads Oasis, the largest parrot sanctuary in the United States, "Moluccans, as well as Umbrellas (*C. alba*) and Sulphur-crested (*C. sulphurea*) 'toos are what we are most likely to receive calls about. The larger cockatoos are wonderful companions while they are immature, perhaps 2-5 years. Thereafter, they need an amount of tactile social interaction that most human households can't provide."

Bonnie Kenk, founder of PEAC (Parrot Education and Adoption Center) in San Diego frequently sees the results of Moluccan Cockatoos that cannot adjust to the role of happy household pet. In an article she wrote for the Jan/Feb 2001 edition of *Original Flying Machine*, Kenk describes her efforts to rehabilitate a self-mutilating Moluccan:

"After living with a Moluccan Cockatoo for over five years, I've come to the conclusion that while most parrots do very well in captivity, Moluccan Cockatoos (and probably male Umbrella Cockatoos) should never have been taken out of the wild and made to come live in our living rooms."

Phoebe Linden acknowledges that many Moluccan Cockatoos end up in inadequate, inappropriate pet situations. "Only two per cent of the people who are interested in owning a Moluccan cockatoo are qualified to keep them," Linden said. But on the other hand, she sees the survival of the species as being dependent on cockatoos produced by breeders in the United States.

"If they are ever to fly again in the wild it will be from the ones that are in this country," Linden said. "Indonesia is going to blow itself off the face of the earth and with it goes these cockatoos. If that area on the planet does survive, it will be the progeny of these captive-bred birds that will be the key to repopulation. It could be the Moluccan's only hope."

I asked Phoebe how a hand-raised cockatoo could create progeny with the survival skills only wild caught parents could provide.

She acknowledged that allowing captive Moluccans to raise their chicks is extremely difficult. "The pets that we've bred this far can't make that transition into a breeding bird. Traditional aviculture has created crazy, neurotic, freaked out messes

worse in third generation hand-feds who are even more aggressive than their fathers. Her solution was to surgically mutilate the beak of the male cockatoo, something referred to as "disarming" - a disfiguring procedure that removes a portion of the cockatoo's upper and lower beak. The article resulted in a huge outcry from animal lovers who were appalled by the actions some breeders took in order to produce product for the pet bird trade.



Hannah the Moluccan Cockatoo. Photo: Don Preisler

that should never be bred. But we're in a new generation of breeding birds, in a new generation of nurturing them, so I'm hopeful that maybe these birds will be able to do dual duty." (Be both pets and breeding birds.)

Linden's comments about the failure of breeders to successfully breed Moluccan cockatoos in captivity is illustrated in an article written by Jenni Jackson for the *AFA WatchBird* (Vol. XXVIII, No. 1, 2001) entitled "Male Aggression in Cockatoos: The Ultimate Challenge." Jackson operates a parrot breeding facility in Florida called JJ's Jungle Birds. In the article, Jackson writes about her captive-bred male Moluccans maiming and even killing their mates. She reports that the aggression occurs least in her wild-caught breeders, with their handfed babies displaying an alarmingly high incidence of aggression. According to Jackson, the problem gets

Layne Dicker, a parrot behaviorist and frequent contributor to *Original Flying Machine*, *Bird Talk* and other parrot specialty magazines believes that much of aviculture is outdated and morally bankrupt, and that commercially driven aviculture can never serve the needs of the Moluccan Cockatoo.

In the October 2000 issue of *Bird Talk*, which had a special feature entitled "Cockatoos: Love 'Em, Don't Leave 'Em," Dicker was one of several writers contributing cautionary articles about life with a cockatoo. He writes that even if a person buys a cockatoo from a wonderful breeder, they would still have the problems of noise and the potential for biting, feather picking and self-mutilation.

Dr. Stewart Metz, a graduate of the Yale School of Medicine, now works fulltime for the welfare of parrots. He founded the World Parrot Welfare Alliance and wrote the widely circulated "Parrots Bill of Rights." Dr. Metz is cautionary about the suitability of Moluccan cockatoos as pets and agrees with Dicker that breeders do nothing to preserve the species from extinction. In an email interview Dr. Metz wrote:

"The concept that breeding Moluccan cockatoos in captivity helps their species in any way is sheer self-delusion and self-interest. In fact, rather than trying to confine these creatures to 60-80 years in a cage, usually in multiple homes, we should be doing everything possible to save them from extinction in the wild. I doubt that captive-bred Moluccan cockatoos will ever be reintroduced in their natural habitat. Having breeders pull the babies rather than letting them be parent-raised further increases their inadequacy as potential breeding stock. In the case of the Moluccan cockatoo, the concept that "Aviculture is Conservation" does yet more disservice to this wonderful creature that should never have been removed from its forest home and has already suffered too much at the hands of mankind."

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Rebecca Margison, Director of the Avian Protection Society believes Moluccan Cockatoos raised for the pet trade will be the first to see euthanasia used as a way to control their numbers, despite their endangered species status: "Breeding rates will continue, these birds will continue to flood the pet market, unsuspecting buyers will purchase the feathered cuddle bugs, many of these buyers will fail in their attempts to provide adequate amounts of attention and stimulation for these birds, the birds will act out their frustration by screaming, biting, destroying wood and furniture, destroying their feathers and mutilating their bodies, and then the folks will either put the bird in a basement or dark room or give the bird up. Considering their long lifespan, it will simply be too difficult to properly care for these birds long-term. So we will see them being euthanized, probably within five years."

Terry Jones runs the Northern New Jersey Bird Mart, one of the few marts that forbids the sale of unweaned parrots. A few months ago, Jones adopted a male Moluccan cockatoo. Things were going fine until she received a visit from three-year-old granddaughter. The bird flew off the perch and attacked Jones without warning. She was in the emergency room for three hours and said her arm looked like it was mauled by a dog.

"I don't blame the cockatoo," Jones said. "I blame whatever was done to this bird before it came to my home. The bird business needs to get control of itself and start taking responsibility for what it's doing to these parrots. These are wild animals - not domestic pets. Some of these birds should be illegal to own without a permit. People in the bird business complain about possible legislation, but if the bird people don't start policing themselves, then they deserve to have the government come into and take control of the situation."

For those of us who have experienced the loving nature of a Moluccan Cockatoo such stories are horrific - but at the same time, credible. We've seen what can happen when their needs aren't met. So to those rare breeders who care about the future of the magnificent Moluccan, please educate prospective owners. Make sure they know this is a longer-than-lifetime commitment. If legislation is needed to remove parrots from abuse by the unscrupulous breeders, then I support it. And to those who think they want a Moluccan Cockatoo as a pet - before you buy one, consider taking an eco-tour to their natural habitat, a small island in Indonesia. See them as they were meant to be; spirited, wild and free. Then decide if you want to keep one in a cage.



Across the miles from Zuni to Rome

By AVRIL BARTON

2002 was a very eventful year for me, as I had decided to spend a lot of it talking to both adults and schools about the loss of parrot habitat and how we could help to slow it down, by doing simple things like using less paper products etc. and getting everyone interested enough to at least study what this far distant thing called the rainforest does for the world. When you live in the centre of a major city and you just jump in the car at the drop of a hat, global warming are usually just words that mean little or at the most, something that won't affect us too much in our lifetime.



When you go out in the garden and see all the spring flowers showing through the soil in January, the trees in bud long before they should be... think about it, for every tree that is destroyed in some far distant forest, not only have the parrots lost another nesting place and possible food source, but it is affecting us close to home, so now is the time to do something, however small, to help prevent it.

I started 2002, 6 thousand miles away in Zuni in New Mexico, an unforgettable visit to the Zuni tribe of North American Indians, who I had been sending discarded macaw and parrot feathers to for their religious and ceremonial costumes. This tribe is one of the oldest known and the macaw / parrot / golden eagles are their most revered bird. The story of my visit can be read in the August 2002 issue of *PsittaScene*. While visiting the school there I promised to visit the British International School in Rome, as the two schools had been writing to each other since my first contact with the Zuni in the year 2000.

So in December of 2002 I went to Italy to meet my new school friends in Rome. The time spent with the class was lovely, I was able to tell them all about the Zuni children and more importantly, thanks to excellent videos loaned to me by Rosemary Low, I was able to show the children the parrots in their natural world, chicks being hatched and fed in the nests and one of Glossy Black Cockatoo babies being taught to fly by their parents.



The result of this visit and talk is the children are now aware that for every piece of unnecessary paper used, every plastic carrier bag used when a product is invariably already wrapped twice on manufacture, somewhere a bird, animal, insect or plant life will suffer directly from their action.

There are 16 children in Rome who now take conservation seriously ... we are only the caretakers of the future, if only each one of us could get 16 of the next generation to do their bit no matter how small, there would be a future for everything including our most precious parrots.



Finally on my last day in Rome I visited the Vatican and found a painting in the galleries there called 'Adam and Eve in the garden of paradise' (my translation from Italian). It was painted by Peter Wenceslao and was hundreds of years old. I was amazed to find all kinds of parrot-like birds painted in the trees. Just goes to prove how long these wonderful birds have entranced humans.

