



## **Cuddling a Cockatoo: What's Love Got To Do With It?**

By Shauna Roberts

Cockatoos are special. You must enjoy their special noise, feather dander and dust throughout your house daily, knowing it will never be dust free. At the moment you need the on/off button on your TV remote you find that it's no longer there; you don't mind ever again being able to hear the critical part of any movie you watch at home because a 'too's yell will drown it out. It's all part of their special packaging and if you've fallen in love and can make the lifetime commitment to them and their needs, and you have all else that it takes, then what could be better than a cockatoo? Not a bundle of cuddles but a feathered package full of their own ideas, a mischievous way about them, and interior decorating ideas very different than ours. At least life ain't dull when sharing it with a 'too!

Baby cockatoos have to be one of the sweetest creatures on earth and that sweet nature may be their own worst enemy. They can be irresistible and so cuddly that we can unknowingly end up teaching them nothing more than how to cuddle. A 'too that is so attached to its human has been affectionately referred to as a *cocka-tumor* by Julie Murad and the name is so appropriate!

One statement I hear often repeated is when a baby cockatoo is around 2-3 years old is, "What happened to my baby?" Well...babies do grow up. Unlike puppies that we expect to grow into dogs and kittens that mature into cats, we don't always think of baby parrots maturing into adult birds and many of us don't even know what to expect from an maturing parrot. Maybe it's partially because a baby parrot so closely resembles an adult in its looks. A baby cockatoo who has been cuddly all of its life can suddenly start to bite, scream, pluck or, in some cases, have cloacal prolapse or start to lay eggs, both of which can be life threatening. We should be asking ourselves what might start these behaviors? I think that if I was expected to sit and sit and cuddle and sit and cuddle some more day after day after day I would eventually act out too. I mean, how boring would a life of only or mostly cuddling be for a healthy parrot full of energy? And also the pressure that is sometimes put onto these birds by humans to be such a huge part of their human's life, fulfilling the human's emotional needs, can be enormous pressure for the bird, and is not a fair or good thing for any bird.

Cockatoos, when seen in the wild or with those living in our homes, that are given the opportunity to be cockatoos are often energetic clowns and appear to be full of a natural love for life. What does cuddling look like in the wild? As far as I know it hasn't been observed or documented. I cannot imagine what it would even look like; it is something that we do with them most likely because we have enjoyed the companionship for so many years of dogs, cats and other pets that enjoy and do well when being stroked and cuddled. For parrots, however, full body stroking is not a natural activity by any means and is actually sexually stimulating to them. Excessive cuddling can lead to chronic cloacal prolapse which prone to bacterial infection or start excessive egg laying in addition to creating biting and screaming problem behaviors. Prolapsing problems are most often seen in Umbrella cockatoos, though no one knows why this species dominates.

I'm often asked, "If you don't cuddle your 'toos, then how do you interact with them? What else can you do with them? After all they love to cuddle and it can seem like a cruel idea to never be cuddly with them." Well, I do cuddle my 'toos. I live with 5 male and 2 female (hen) Umbrellas and 2 Moluccan hens. I love to cuddle, probably more than they do, but I limit that particular

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interaction with them and they seem content. More often than not they give me a cuddle and then they choose to run off to work on one of their projects or we enjoy a game or other activity together at their invite. From my experience after letting them make the decision about cuddling, on most days, they only want a little bit, such as a 10 second hug. My flock appears to have too many individual important projects to have much desire to spend hours cuddling with me. A big part of my bird care duties is taking the time to set up my birds' environment for success which involves foraging and other enrichment activities for them to use.

I interact with my birds by giving each a short hug, or a careful kiss on the top of their head. I don't stroke their bodies, rub beaks or tails. They receive frequent head scratches (often preferred to body cuddles, especially by the males), and foot rubs if they like them. One guy lifts his foot up for me to blow raspberries on it. They also receive a lot, and I mean a LOT of praise for independent play, being quiet, working on their projects and doing any other desirable behavior. Praising them shows them that you acknowledge what they are doing and that you are interested in their lives

Even though Umbrellas and Moluccans respond quickly to cuddling, I suspect we teach it to them. The excessive cuddle can become the cockatoos' worst enemy. They learn the cuddle behavior well. But is it the cockatoo who wants to be cuddled, or is it us who needs them to cuddle for our own needs? I believe that it stems from our need - not theirs. Teaching cockatoos, as well as all other companion parrots, independence and how to be birds is probably the best and most responsible gift we can give them.