

Greater sulphur-crested cockatoo

Cacatua galerita galerita Australia

Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are the nominate subspecies of *Cacatua galerita* along with the triton and Medium sulphur-crested cockatoos. Greater sulphur-crested are very large white cockatoos with recurved yellow crests. The crest feathers lie flat on the top of the head with the tips curling upward. The only other color is yellow on the insides of the wings. The crest feathers spread out and up when the crest is erect. They have white eye-rings and a longer, more narrow beak than Tritons or Medium sulphur-crested cockatoos and a small head which looks too small for their body. The crest feathers are also longer and more narrow than other subspecies.

Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are found in the high rainfall coastal belt of eastern and northern Australia. They inhabit forests, especially mature canopy forests from the lowlands extending up to an elevation of 1000 to 1500 m. (3000 to 4500 ft). They also frequent savannahs and grass lands where they feed on grass seeds, herbs and in crop lands of wheat and corn. They also eat roots, rhizomes, the seeds of some harmful weeds, insect larvae, nuts and flowers. They are most active in early morning and late afternoon. In the winter when food is in short supply they often enter cities in search of food.

Length is 19 to 21 inches. Weight is 800-1100 grams. Males are generally larger than females and have larger heads and beaks.

Greater sulphur-crested and other cockatoo species can be very long lived and a few individuals in zoos have lived up to 50-60 years. Precise data on life span of the average Greater sulphur-crested cockatoo is poorly documented. Birds often succumb to disease or injury and don't live for their potential lifespan.

Breeding age can be as young as 3 years, however hand-reared birds may not begin breeding before they are 6 to 8 years old. Breeding life span is not precisely known but is possibly up to 30+ years.

Personality - Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are affectionate, playful and highly intelligent birds. They are excellent companion birds for those who want a charming, loving bird but are not quite as docile as Moluccans and Umbrellas. Greater sulphur-crested tend to be very demanding of attention and if they are deprived of attention can become very noisy and destructive or turn to plucking or self-mutilation behavior. Imprinted cockatoos may become possessive of their owners. This possessive behavior can lead to unpredictable or aggressive behavior towards other people especially as the bird reaches sexual maturity.

While Greater sulphur-crested often speak, typically better than most cockatoos. One famous talking Greater was “Fred” from the TV show Baretta. They are very vocal and many birds loose their home due to loud screaming. This behavior is often learned when young birds hear the morning or afternoon screaming of another cockatoo.

Activities – Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are playful and inquisitive and they love to chew objects in their surroundings. They are very destructive if allow to perch on furniture. They should always be provided with toys, blocks of wood or branches that they can chew. In order to ensure safety companion cockatoos should not be allowed unsupervised freedom in the home as they often encounter toxins or dangerous items. Young cockatoos should be socialized to many people and exposed to a variety of situations such as new cages, toys, visits to the veterinarian, handling by friends, wing and nail clips, etc. to avoid fear of novel situations.

Dietary needs - Cockatoos should be fed a formulated (pelleted or extruded diet) as a basis for good nutrition. Kaytee Exact is an excellent staple diet for cockatoos. The diet should be supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables daily to add variety and psychological enrichment. Feed approximately 1/3-1/2 cup of Pretty Bird and 1/3-1/2 cup of fresh fruits and vegetables daily. If the bird consumes all of it's food, give additional food as desired. Overfeeding leads to pickiness, wastage and throwing food.

Treats such as seeds, nuts and table foods maybe given in small amounts especially as rewards for good behavior.

The weight of mature Greater sulphur crested cockatoos should be monitored frequently as they have a tendency to become obese. Obese Greater tend to develop large lipomas around the abdomen, flanks, and behind the legs. These may require a very restricted diet and sometimes surgical removal. Large lipomas near the vent may interfere with breeding.

Special requirements - Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are very efficient in utilization of calories. Juvenile cockatoos are notoriously picky eaters and don't seem to need much food to maintain themselves while adults easily gain too much weight. Try to ensure that the food that they eat is nutritious and avoid high fat seeds such as sunflower and safflower. Vitamin supplements are not needed for birds that are eating a formulated diet.

Grooming - Routine bathing or showering is vital to maintaining good plumage and skin condition. Birds can be misted and allowed to dry in a warm room or in the sun, or gently dried with a blow drier. Care should be taken not to clip the wing feathers excessively as cockatoos often fall and injure themselves. Clip only the primary flight feathers and only enough so the bird will glide to the floor.

Identification - All companion and breeding birds should be individually identified to assist in recovery if lost and assist in maintenance of medical and genealogical records. Many breeders apply closed legs bands when chicks are young. While they present a slight risk of entrapment closed bands are preferable to no identification, especially for breeding birds. Microchips, which can be implanted into the muscle or under the skin, are a reliable means of identification but require electronic readers to verify identification. Tattoos may be used but often fade or become illegible with time. Foot prints may have some application in identification.

Sexing Most of the white cockatoos species can be sexed by eye color when mature, The eyes of a mature female Greater sulphur-crested are red while the eyes of the male are dark brown or black. Juveniles of both sexes will have brown eyes. The sex of breeders should be confirmed by surgical sexing or DNA sexing.

Housing - Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are prone to obesity and should be provided the largest cage that space and budget allows. Durable cage construction is very important because Greater sulphur-crested are very strong chewers and can easily break welds on poorly constructed cages. Many are also adept at opening cage latches. Locks or escape proof latches may be necessary on cages. The cage should be as large as possible but must allow at least enough room to fully spread the wings. Ideally the bird will have an outdoor cage as well to allow play time in the fresh-air and sunlight.

Breeding – Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos breed well in captivity but are not as prolific or bred as commonly as Moluccan and Umbrella cockatoos. In North America Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos breed predominantly in the winter and spring. Clutch size is typically 2 to 3 eggs. The breeding cage should be large enough to allow flight between perches to help prevent obesity. One inch by one inch 12 gauge welded wire is a good choice for cage construction. A suggested size is 5 feet wide by 5 feet tall by 10 feet long suspended 4 feet above the ground or floor.

Nest Box - Double entrance boxes are often used to reduce the chance of the male trapping the female in the box. Large grand-father style wooden boxes can be used. Size should be approximately 18" x 18" x 24". Metal barrels, plastic pickle barrels and garbage cans can be used, however the act of chewing a wooden nest box may stimulate reproductive behavior.

Incubation period is approximately 24-26 days. Chicks will usually fledge at approximately 12 to 14 weeks of age. Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are relatively easy to hand-rear. Most handrearing formulas can be used successfully, however if you are using a formula which is relatively high in fat, care must be taken not to overfeed the chick as obesity and fatty liver syndrome can occur and may be fatal. Exact Regular handrearing formula is a good choice.

Aggression

Male cockatoos frequently become aggressive toward their mates. Fatal attacks may occur in which the male bird severely bites the face, wings, and legs of the female. Cage construction and management must take into

consideration techniques to reduce mate aggression. Clipping the wings of the male prior to the breeding season will help the female to escape in case the male becomes aggressive. Aggressive behavior may occur in compatible breeding pairs.

When breeding cockatoos, noise and proximity to neighbors must be considered. If housed outdoors cockatoos often call at night especially during a full moon. In southern states outdoor caging must be protected from opossums to prevent exposure to the parasite *Sarcocystis falcatula* which can result in a fatal lung infection.

Common diseases and disorders

- Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (Very common in the wild population but is now rare in captive cockatoos)
- Proventricular dilation disease
- Feather-picking
- Self mutilation
- Juvenile chewing of flight feathers and tail
- Poor eating habits - picky eaters
- Bacterial and fungal infections
- Sarcocystis
- Cloacal prolapse
- Mate aggression
- Toxicity, ingestion of metals
- Obesity, fatty liver syndrome
- Lipomas (fatty tumors)

Conservation Status - Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are listed on Appendix II on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species but only because of the listing of almost all Parrot species. Their wild population is large and stable, and possibly increasing in some areas due to availability of water in the interior (for cattle). Many cockatoos are killed in Australia as crop pests but Australia does not permit the export of native wildlife. Greater sulphur-crested cockatoos are uncommon in the United States.

