

Palm cockatoo

Probosciger aterrimus

New Guinea and Australia

Also known as Black palm, Goliath cockatoo.

The Palm cockatoo is a unique and magnificent species. They are large black cockatoos with erect crests, bright red naked facial skin and a large imposing beak. The plumage is entirely black but looks gray due to feather powder. The mandibles do not fit when closed revealing the bicolor (red and black) tongue.

Palm cockatoos are found primarily in New Guinea (Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya- Indonesia). They inhabit coastal forests to an elevation of 1,300m (3,900 ft). They are also found in the Cape York Peninsula of northeastern Australia (Queensland). They inhabit eucalyptus forests and dense savannah woodlands. They feed on large hard forest seeds including *Pandanus* , Palm nuts, fruits and buds.

Length is 20 to 25 inches. Weight is 550-1000 grams. Males are generally larger than females and have larger heads and beaks. *Aterrimus* palms are significantly smaller than Goliath palm cockatoos.

Subspecies;

P. a. aterrimus – Smallest birds, found on Southern New Guinea and Cape York Peninsula.

P. a. goliath – Larger birds, found on west Papuan islands.

P. a. stenolophus – Large like goliath but with narrow crest feathers. Found in Irian Jaya and northern New Guinea.

Palm cockatoos and other cockatoo species can be very long lived (probably around 50 years) but precise life span is unknown.

Breeding age is not known. Hand-reared males may be problematic breeders. Breeding life span is not precisely known but is possibly up to 25+ years.

Personality - Palm cockatoos are gentle by nature and can be excellent pet birds. They are relatively quiet except for their breeding call which is a series of shrill whistling calls performed with bows. Palm cockatoos don't often speak.

Activities – Palm cockatoos are inquisitive and love to chew objects in their surroundings. Their beak was designed to open very hard nuts so they are very powerful chewers and need to chew to keep their beak the proper length. They are very destructive if allowed 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 - Palm cockatoos are not so efficient in utilization of calories as many other cockatoo species. They need a relatively high caloric diet including nuts and high fat seeds or a higher fat extruded diet. Palm Cockatoos should be fed a formulated (pelleted or extruded diet) as a basis for good nutrition. Kaytee Exact is an excellent staple diet for palm cockatoos. The diet should be supplemented with fresh fruits and vegetables daily to add variety and psychological enrichment. Feed approximately 1/2 cup of Exact and 1/3 cup of fresh fruits and vegetables daily. They should also be offered 4-6 large nuts daily. The best choices are walnuts, pecans, macadamia nuts, almonds or filberts. If peanuts are fed they should be shelled first and inspected for fungal growth. Palm cockatoos are usually thin by nature and not likely to become overweight. Vitamin supplements are not needed for birds that are eating a formulated diet.

Palms need to have hard items to chew to keep their beaks in good shape. While they should be provided with toys they also need things to shred. Provide fresh branches for additional chewing.

A good indicator of general health is the cheek patch color. If pale it indicates poor health or environment. Sunlight is important for good health and enhances the red color of the cheek patches.

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. Palm cockatoos are light weight and are better flyers than Moluccans and Umbrellas and a few more feathers should be removed.

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. Footprints may have some application in identification.

Sexing Palm cockatoos are monomorphic and can not be sexed by eye color. Sex of breeders should be confirmed by surgical sexing or DNA sexing. Males are significantly larger than females and have a larger heavier beak.

Housing - Palm cockatoos are very active and should be provided the largest cage that space and budget allows. Durable cage construction is very important because Palms 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 playtime in the fresh-air and sunlight.

Breeding – Palm cockatoos are difficult to breed in captivity. They require a roomy flight with privacy. Unlike most psittacines, palm cockatoos build a nest of twigs inside the nest box. Clutch size is typically 1 egg. One inch by one inch 12 gauge-welded wire is a good choice for cage construction. For birds that are destructive of wire, chain link is the most durable caging material. A full flight (to the ground, is recommended. A suggested size is 5 feet wide by 8 feet tall by 12 feet long.

Nest Box – The nest box should be open on top, 24” x 24” and approximately 6 feet tall. Metal barrels, plastic pickle barrels and garbage cans can be used, however the act of chewing a wooden nest box may stimulate reproductive behavior. The must be provided with branches with which to build a nest.

Incubation period is approximately 27-30 days. Chicks will usually fledge at approximately 10 to 12 weeks of age. Palm cockatoos are very difficult to hand-rear and should only be attempted by very experienced hand-feeders. Ideally chicks should be parent reared for at least 3-4 weeks. High protein, high fat custom formulas are needed for hand rearing Palm cockatoo chicks.

Aggression

Male cockatoos frequently become aggressive toward their mates. While such attacks have occurred with palm cockatoos this behavior is uncommon. Because of special courtship behavior and nest building activities, the male should not be clipped as in other cockatoo species.

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 (Occurs in the wild population but is now uncommon in captive palm cockatoos)
- Proventricular dilation disease is especially prevalent in palm cockatoos and is a threat to captive populations
- Feather-picking

- Aspergillosis
- Beak over-growth – may require periodic trimming
- Poor eating habits - picky eaters
- Bacterial and fungal infections
- Sarcocystis
- Malnutrition, anemia, hypoproteinemia
- Mate aggression – uncommon
- Toxicity, ingestion of metals
- Chlamydia infections (psittacosis or parrot fever)

Conservation Status - Threatened - Palm cockatoos are listed on Appendix I on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species because of declines in their wild population. International trade is restricted and allowed only with import and export permits. Palm cockatoos are uncommon and expensive in the United States.