

SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOO CARE GUIDE

Cacatua galerita · Know before you bring one home

ORIGIN	SIZE	WEIGHT	LIFESPAN	NOISE	TALKING
Australia & New Guinea	44–55 cm	800–1,000 g	40–70+ years	Extremely loud	Moderate

Personality & behaviour

- Confident, intelligent, playful and physically formidable. Sulphur-crested are natural performers and quick learners, and they apply that intelligence to destruction and escape with equal enthusiasm.
- Limit petting to the head and neck only; body stroking produces sexually frustrated, screaming, plucking birds and, in hand-reared hens, can contribute to cloacal prolapse. Watch for a raised crest with a rigid stance and a lowered head — this precedes a serious bite. Feather-destructive behaviour is common in under-stimulated birds.
- Use positive reinforcement only — never hit, shout at or frighten a bird for biting or vocalising.

Housing & cage setup

- A purpose-built enclosure of at least 180 × 120 × 200 cm, or a walk-in aviary. Bar spacing 25–38 mm in heavy-gauge stainless steel with locking clasps. Standard cages do not contain this species for long.
- Very heavy natural-branch perches (40–60 mm) replaced as destroyed, plus daily destructible hardwood in quantity. This beak destroys furniture, skirting boards, window frames and cabinetry given the chance.

Time, company & noise

- 4–6 hours out of the cage daily, supervised, with real exercise and a structured enrichment routine.
- Among the loudest of all parrots — a screech that carries across a suburb and is painful at close range. Screaming at dawn and dusk is instinctive. Entirely unsuitable for flats, townhouses, semi-detached homes or estates with noise rules.
- Continuous destruction and foraging. Supply more wood than you think is reasonable; it is the cheapest behavioural medicine available.
- Provide 10–12 hours of quiet, uninterrupted darkness on a predictable schedule. Sleep-deprived parrots become irritable, scream more and are more likely to pluck. A full 12-hour night reduces hormonal screaming markedly.

What to feed

- A low to moderate fat complete cockatoo pellet as the foundation.
- A large daily volume of vegetables and leafy greens — the bulk of the fresh food.
- Sprouted seed, cooked legumes and whole grains in measured portions.
- Limited fruit and very limited nuts.
- A cuttlebone and clean fresh water daily.
- Serve most of the ration through foraging devices. Sulphur-crested gain weight easily in captivity and a lean, busy bird is a quieter and healthier one.

Do not feed

- Sunflower-based seed mixes as a staple.
- Avocado — every part of the plant, including guacamole.
- Chocolate and cocoa.
- Caffeine, alcohol and xylitol (sugar-free sweetener).
- Onion, garlic, chives and leeks.
- Fruit pips and stones: apple, pear, cherry, apricot, peach and plum.
- Raw or dried beans — all legumes must be thoroughly cooked.
- Rhubarb leaves.
- Salty, sugary, fried or processed human food.
- Dairy in more than a trace — birds cannot digest lactose.
- Mouldy or fermenting food, including fruit left in the bowl.
- Anything from your mouth, plate or fork — human saliva carries bacteria that kill birds.
- Grit. Parrots husk their own seed and grit can cause fatal impaction.
- Human medicines or supplements unless prescribed by an avian vet.

Health & what to watch

- **PBFD** (psittacine beak and feather disease) has cockatoos as its classic host and is untreatable — screening matters. Also watch for feather-destructive behaviour, obesity, cloacal prolapse in hormonal hand-reared birds, and respiratory irritation from heavy powder down.
- **Before you buy:** Ask the seller for the hatch date, the closed ring number, a DNA sex certificate and any disease screening already done. A seller who cannot answer those questions, or who will not let you watch the bird eat, is a seller to walk away from. Ask what the bird is currently eating, so you can keep it stable for the first fortnight.
- **Your first month:** Book a wellness examination in the first week, not just when something looks wrong. Quarantine a new bird for 30–45 days away from any birds you already keep, ideally in separate air space. Recommended screening: psittacine beak and feather disease (PBFD), psittacosis (*Chlamydia psittaci*), polyomavirus and avian bornavirus.
- **Ongoing & human health:** Annual check-ups, moving to twice yearly for larger species over ten. Wing clipping is not routine care — discuss it first, because flight builds fitness, balance and confidence. Psittacosis passes to people as a flu-like illness or pneumonia: if you develop unexplained respiratory symptoms, tell your doctor you keep birds.

Urgent — see an avian vet today

- Difficulty or open-mouth breathing
- Pronounced tail bobbing at rest
- Fluffed, quiet and sitting on the cage floor
- Collapse or severe weakness
- Bleeding that does not stop, including a broken blood feather
- Seizures or loss of balance
- Repeated vomiting or regurgitation
- Not eating, or noticeable weight loss
- Straining, a swollen abdomen, or a hen unable to pass an egg
- Sudden major change in droppings
- Any contact with a cat or dog, even a minor scratch
- Suspected poisoning, fumes or trauma
- Pink tissue protruding from the vent — cloacal prolapse is an emergency
- Progressive feather loss and beak deformity — have the bird screened for PBFD

Who this species suits

- **First-time owners:** No. This is an expert-only species in a domestic setting.
- **Experienced owners:** Only with aviary-scale housing, a detached property, and a succession plan for a bird that may live seventy years.
- **Families & children:** Not for households with young children. The bite is capable of severing a finger and the noise is beyond most family tolerance.

Before you decide

- I have aviary-scale housing, not a cage in a lounge.
- My property is detached and my neighbours accept the noise.
- I can supply large quantities of destructible wood every week.
- I have a written succession plan for a seventy-year lifespan.
- If several answers are “No”, this is not the right bird for you — and walking away is a good outcome.

Recommended avian specialist

- **Bryanston Avian, Exotic & Small Animals Clinic**
- 99 Grosvenor Road, Bryanston, Johannesburg
- 011 706 1381 · WhatsApp 061 533 9950 · info@baesac.co.za
- Not every vet treats birds. Find your nearest avian-experienced practice before you need one.



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