

UMBRELLA COCKATOO CARE GUIDE

Cacatua alba · Know before you bring one home

ORIGIN North Maluku, Indonesia	SIZE 44–48 cm	WEIGHT 500–750 g	LIFESPAN 40–70+ years	NOISE Extremely loud	TALKING Limited
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Personality & behaviour

- Intensely social, physically powerful and emotionally demanding. An umbrella wants contact more or less constantly and does not outgrow it. Intelligent and trainable, but the need for company is the defining feature.
- Limit all petting to the head and neck. Cuddling an umbrella against the body and stroking its back and under its wings is sexual stimulation to the bird, and it is a leading cause of the screaming, plucking and aggression that gets these birds rehomed. Separation distress is severe and genuine, and feather-destructive behaviour is common.
- 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 150 × 120 × 200 cm, or a walk-in aviary. Bar spacing 25–38 mm in heavy-gauge stainless steel with locking clasps on every door.
- Very heavy natural-branch perches (40–60 mm) replaced as destroyed, and a large daily supply of destructible hardwood. Expect a significant, permanent toy budget.

Time, company & noise

- 5–6 hours of company daily. An umbrella left alone while the household works will scream, pluck and in some cases self-mutilate. This is the predictable outcome, not bad luck.
- Extremely loud, with screaming that carries across a suburb and is painful at close range. Separation screaming is common and persistent. Unsuitable for any attached or closely spaced housing.
- A structured daily programme of foraging, destruction and training — not a few toys in a cage.
- 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 is one of the few reliable tools against hormonal screaming.

What to feed

- A low to moderate fat complete cockatoo pellet as the foundation.
- A large daily volume of vegetables and leafy greens.
- Sprouted seed, cooked legumes and whole grains in measured portions.
- Limited fruit and very limited nuts — umbrellas gain weight readily.
- A cuttlebone and clean fresh water daily.
- Deliver most of the daily ration through foraging rather than a bowl. For a cockatoo this is behavioural treatment as much as nutrition: time spent working for food is time not spent screaming or plucking.

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 pits 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

- High risk of obesity, feather-destructive behaviour and self-mutilation when under-stimulated, plus PBFD and respiratory irritation from heavy powder down. Cockatoo dust genuinely affects people with asthma and other lung conditions.
- **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
- Any open chest or wing wound from self-mutilation — this needs same-day veterinary attention

Who this species suits

- **First-time owners:** No. The gap between how an umbrella behaves at six months and at six years is larger than in any other species here.
- **Experienced owners:** Only with cockatoo-specific experience, aviary-scale housing, a household where the bird is rarely alone, and a succession plan.
- **Families & children:** Not suited to a typical family home. The noise, the bite and the bird's emotional needs are all beyond what most families can absorb.

Before you decide

- Someone is home with this bird for most of the day, for decades.
- I will limit petting to the head and neck, however much the bird solicits more.
- My housing and neighbours can absorb screaming that carries across a suburb.
- I have a written succession plan — this bird will likely outlive my ability to care for it.
- 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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