

## **Cuckoo for Coco**

Coco starts her days the way many of us do. First, she has a light breakfast of fresh fruit, then it's on to a shower and selection of the day's clothing. As she makes her decision, only one thing stands out - Coco is a bird.

Coco, a charming four-year-old Umbrella Cockatoo, lives with her owner and companion, seventy-two year old Ethel Brown. Brown purchased Coco as a baby, and has enjoyed spoiling her with toys, treats, and clothing ever since.

### **Coco Chooses Ethel**

Not long after her husband passed away, Brown decided to find a companion. "I knew I wanted a bird – something small like a cockatiel or budgie – but when I saw Coco in the pet store, I walked right on by the little birds."

She asked the store owner if she could touch the beautiful white bird, but before the woman could answer, the nearly 20-inch creature had acted on its own. "She stepped up onto the arm that was holding my purse. It was very awkward, like a fawn learning to walk. She didn't stop when she got up, though. She went right for my chest and just curled up in my arms."

Despite the owner's warnings of noise, mess, and general destructiveness, Brown had made up her mind. "I spend most of my time at home. I've got plenty of time to figure out what this bird needs."

That was more than three years ago. Today, Brown and Coco are fast friends who share their love of peanuts, swing music, and *The Price is Right*. When watching that show, Coco imitates a popular strategy that contestants use to guess the value of a featured item. Throughout most of the program, she can be heard shouting, "One dollar! One dollar!"

### **Harder than it Looks**

When Coco is good, she is a downy white angel. As she leans her head on Brown's shoulder, her big dark eyes close halfway and she raises a wing to allow the avian equivalent of a tummy rub. The only sound that escapes from her powerful black beak is a soft cooing noise.

When Coco is mischievous, however, she might destroy expensive toys, figure out the latest locking mechanism on her cage, or squawk for what seems like hours. Brown laughs. "Squawking is probably an understatement," she says. "That girl screams like a banshee." Typical cockatoo screams average about 120 decibels, well above the normal pain threshold at 110 decibels.

Uninformed buyers are a problem for parrots of all types. Because many people view parrots as status symbols or exotic decorations, a great number of them end up in shelters when they start acting like parrots. Status symbols aren't supposed to scream and bite.

Others end up in far worse scenarios. Even conscientious parrot owners have a lot to learn in the beginning. Common household items give off gases or strong scents that can kill beloved pets in only minutes. Candles with metal wicks, strong cleaning products, and Teflon cookware are just a few things that must go if a bird is to survive.

Brown had no problem removing the hazardous items from her home. “If it can kill a bird,” she reasons, “I can’t imagine it’s much better for me or my grandkids to breathe.”

## **Seniors and Parrots**

Since many birds can live as long as humans, it is important for all parrot owners to know where their bird would live if they became unable to care for it. Among senior citizens, this need is even more pronounced. When Brown purchased Coco, her family did not approve. “They said I was crazy for buying an animal that would outlive me. Then they met her.”

A single meeting with Coco was all it took to convince Brown’s daughter and son-in-law to accept responsibility when the time comes. Beyond that, her grandchildren argue about “who’s next in line” to care for Coco.

Senior citizens like Brown must also be attentive to the exercise needs of their bird. A spacious cage is a necessity, especially if the bird will spend a great deal of time in it. Finding the room and money for such a cage is no small task, either. A large bird like Coco needs a strong cage of at least three feet on all sides. Such cages can easily run into the thousands of dollars.

## **Big Sacrifices, Big Rewards**

One of Brown’s greatest pleasures is spoiling her Coco. There is an entire market for avian apparel and entertainment, just as dogs and cats have their own lines of toys and clothing. Virginia-based Avian Fashions, creates a line of bird clothing designed to fit birds as small as lovebirds or as large as geese.

While the uninitiated may laugh at the idea of Cockatoo couture, the outfits serve a purpose. Since most birds are unable to go more than twenty or thirty minutes between “droppings”, the suits act as diapers, catching waste that might ruin carpets or furniture. Further, the suits are equipped for the attachment of a leash, allowing owners to take their birds for a walk outside without worrying about trimming their wings. Another category of buyers uses them to treat and minimize feather-plucking problems.

Sales figures show that the idea is catching on. Last year, the company surpassed the \$1 million dollar mark in gross sales. The fashions have been featured in USA Today, National Geographic for Kids, and on the Animal Planet channel.

Coco is a devoted fan of the clothing designed by Avian Fashions. Her wardrobe includes basic flightsuits in Lycra and fleece, as well as warm monogrammed sweaters and whimsical costumes. Her “Santa Claws” outfit has become a holiday favorite of the entire family.

Other new products cater to the bathing needs of companion parrots. Suction-cup perches for the shower are a common product in large pet stores, and misting bottles allow birds to feel refreshed when a shower isn’t possible. More complicated arrangements feature misting volcanoes and mini-waterfalls built for custom cages.

For birds on the go, a number of transport options exist. Clear acrylic carriers called “Wing-a-bagos” allow birds an unobstructed view of their surroundings. Another backpack-style carrier uses a screen window to keep out mosquitoes that could carry West Nile virus. Both come fully equipped with perches and detachable food and water bowls. At around one hundred dollars each, they’re a bargain compared to designer dog carriers that fail to offer such luxuries.

## **Sharing the Love**

Bird owners are nothing if not enthusiastic. In St. Louis, the Gateway Parrot Club offers monthly meetings and speakers on topics of interest to parrot enthusiasts. Once a year, they also sponsor the Annual Hookbill Fair with prizes, vendors, and guest speakers. While pet birds are not allowed in for safety reasons, guests have the opportunity to meet a variety of birds offered for sale by breeders. This year, the fair will take place on August 27th and 28th at the Greensfelder Recreation Complex in Ballwin.

Among the fair's featured guests is Mark Bittner, author of "The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill". The title has been released in book and documentary form, both of which have been highly successful as compared to other nonfiction works. The story is that of himself, a homeless musician in San Francisco, and the flock of wild cherry-headed conures that he befriended.

Brown is looking forward to attending the fair with her grandchildren, despite the fact that Coco won't be in attendance. "She won't be left out," Ethel emphasized. "She has totally changed my life and I wouldn't dream of coming home without something special for her."