

# ARE COCKATIELS PARROTS OR COCKATOOS?

Have you ever wondered which family of birds cockatiel are related to? I can hear some readers saying "who knows?", and perhaps others saying "who cares?" Well let me tell you that at 11:30 a.m. on 5 April 2001 the author was in quite an awkward situation regarding this distinction. In fact, the answer to this question was all that seemed to matter at the time.

The occasion was an interview by Channel 10 for their program "TOTALLY WILD". Not that the author was "totally" unprepared to field a few questions on cockatiels mind you. He was even feeling a little confident. After all he had been giving talks, and answering topical questions on cockatiels from fellow breeders for years. However, he was not dealing with a fellow breeder here, someone who has trod the same path in cockatiel aviculture, someone who has pondered the same questions in their quest to improve breeding results or produce a specific multi colour mutation or show bird. If only this had been the case!

The interviewer from Channel 10 was a "totally" cool young lady whose only knowledge of cockatiels was derived from the questions prepared for her by a Channel 10 researcher, who in turn quickly acquired his knowledge from surfing the net. Needless to say their view was less tunnel visioned, than that sometimes developed by us die hard cockatiel breeders, and was designed to appeal to general public interest. Even so, one might hope for a benign question to start the interview off with, such as "do cockatiels make good pets?"

No such luck however. The first question came right out of left field. Imagine the scenario; "totally" cool interviewer to "totally" stunned interviewee - "Now Michael the question that I have been dying to ask is are these birds cockatoos or parrots, and can you give some examples to support your answer?"

Interviewee is now in shock and imagining 5 million (or at least a few thousand) viewers witnessing his demise as he fails his first public examination on television; a bit like the victim in the Weakest Link or Survivor. If only they had asked what would now seem like in contrast, a relatively easy question such as "what do you get when you mate a multi split such and such cock to a multi colour mutation so and so hen?"

Interviewee begins to regain some composure and recalls from the deep recesses of his mind having actually read something on the subject. However, that was years ago and Alzheimer's has since taken a heavy toll. Instinct dictates that the right answer lies with the cockatoo family. Under normal circumstances the interviewee might even come up with some plausible reasons to qualify his answer. However, cognitive seizure has now set in and the interviewee does not have the benefit of audience participation or electing to phone a friend.

Still, the interviewee is resourceful if not knowledgeable. He recalls reading a book in the distant past wherein lies the answer. It is the one featuring a poor specimen of a cockatiel with a weeping eye on the front cover. It is the one the interviewee has always treated with disdain, questioning the credibility of a cockatiel expert who features a sick bird on the cover of his book. Then again, perhaps one should not be too hasty and judge a book by its cover, especially a book containing desperately needed information. The relieved interviewee is granted time out to compose himself and refresh his failing memory.

So how did the interviewee fare with his response you are probably thinking? Well let's just say it is a very complex subject and he did a reasonable job under the circumstances. After all 99.9% of viewers probably knew nothing about the subject, and the other 1% so far have had the decency to keep their own counsel.

By now readers might be slightly interested in discovering where cockatiels do fit into the world of birds? Well, after having since done a little research on the subject I will now attempt to explain their position in the scheme of things and reveal which bird they are most closely related to:

All life in the Animal Kingdom is scientifically grouped into various categories. All birds are of the class, AYES (Ayes - a Latin word for birds). The AVES CLASS is then broken down into "ORDERS" of birds. All Parrot type birds (including cockatoos) are of the ORDER, PSITTACIFORMES.

The ORDER PSITTACIFORMES is then broken down into 3 different sub family groups which in plain language can be described as

1. Lorikeets
2. Cockatoos and
3. Parrots

Over the years there has been some debate as to whether Cockatiels belong to the Cockatoo sub family or the Parrot sub family. The most prevailing view of the various experts was that they were of the Cockatoo sub family. This view appears to have been confirmed by Professor Catherine Toft and colleague David Brown who have been involved in Parrot Research and Conservation Biology in the U.S.A. They recently undertook DNA testing to determine the exact relationship between the Cockatiel and other Cockatoos. Their results strongly indicated the Cockatiel is most closely related to the Black Cockatoo of the genus CALYPTORHYNCHUS. This genus includes Red Tailed Blacks, Yellow Tailed Blacks, White Tailed Blacks and Glossy Cockatoos.

You will note that we have just introduced the term "genus" which means a group of closely related species. Not all members of the Cockatoo family are of the same genus e.g. the Sulphur Crested Cockatoo is of the genus, *Cacatua*. Now whilst Cockatiels are members of the Cockatoo sub family, they do not share a common genus with any of the other cockatoos.

Cockatiels are the solitary members of the genus *Nymphicus*, i.e whilst they are members of the Cockatoo sub family and they are most closely related to the Black Cockatoo of the genus CALYPTORHYNCHUS, and they form a unique genus of their own.

In the scientific world all living organisms are part of a classification system and have scientific names that help identify them . The scientific name for the Cockatiel is *Nymphicus hollandicus*. *Nymphicus* tells us what genus the cockatiel is and *hollandicus* tells us what species it is. In the case of Cockatiels , no other bird shares the same genus making the Cockatiel a unique member of the *Nymphicus* genus. The position of the Cockatiel in a scientific classification would go something like this:

|         |                                                                        |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| KINGDOM | - Animal                                                               |
| PHYLUM  | - Chordata (this means animals with a spinal chord)                    |
| CLASS   | - Aves (includes ALL birds)                                            |
| ORDER   | - Psittaciformes (includes all parrot type birds and Cockatoos) SUB    |
| FAMILY  | - Cacatuinae (includes all Cockatoos)                                  |
| GENUS   | - <i>Nymphicus</i> (includes only Cockatiels)                          |
| SPECIES | - <i>Hollandicus</i> ( the only species of the <i>Nymphicus</i> genus) |

Thus far in simple language we have established that there is strong biological evidence to say the cockatiel is part of the Cockatoo sub family, that it is in a genus of its own and that its closest relative is the Black Cockatoo. Physical similarities that wild Cockatiels share with the Black Cockatoo include

- Dark feathering with various patterns of white or yellow/orange/ red pigment especially on wing, tail and facial feathering.
- Within the two species either the male or both sexes possess a round facial spot.
- All females possess barred feathers on the body, wing or tail feathers in contrast to mature males which have unpatterned feathers in the same locations.
- All are sexually dimorphic i.e., the sexes of mature birds are visually evident.

Now for all you readers who easily understood and remembered this, you have my overwhelming admiration. For the rest of you, please spare a thought for the author who had this question put to him without notice during a television interview.

Mike Anderson.