



BY ALAN JONES

Dougal proudly displaying his crest



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ASPERGILLOSIS

PART TWO – THE EMOTION

The attractive colours, intelligence and personalities of parrots give for a very rewarding relationship. Conversely, they can also bring great heartache owing to illness, accident or death. We should all know by now that captive parrots need optimum conditions of diet, housing, lighting, and mental and physical stimulation in order to survive. Yet, in over 30 years of my career as a 'birdvet', *sod's law* frequently came into play. By which I mean that birds kept in less than perfect conditions – dark, damp, seed-only diet – appeared to thrive, with full plumage, while others that had the best of everything ended up plucking feathers or getting sick. That is not to say, of course, that the apparently 'healthy' birds in poor conditions were indeed so – if one could look inside or carry out blood tests, then I am sure sub-clinical problems would be identified. There is no doubt that keeping parrots properly requires a lot of time, commitment, and dedication, and they can give much joy and satisfaction. And yet, it is such owners who suffer most when things go wrong.

I described in part one how aspergillosis can be a difficult disease to diagnose and treat, with complex and prolonged

treatment often still ending with the death of a much-loved bird. During my many years as an avian veterinarian, some such cases were successful, but many patients succumbed to this horrible disease, resulting in heartache for their owners. What follows is the story of two such parrots with which I was very closely and personally involved.

"Hello, this is Maria with Dougal" became a familiar opening to a telephone call from a client from Buckinghamshire with an Umbrella Cockatoo. Maria had taken on her Umbrella Cockatoo Dougal, after he had already been re-homed at least twice because of his noisy screeching, typical of the species. In the year 2000, Dougal began to pluck his chest feathers, and was also subject to intermittent bouts of upper respiratory infection. These birds have comparatively small nostrils for their size, and Dougal's were particularly narrow, and became easily blocked with his feather dust mixing with mucous discharge. Maria would drive all the way down from South Buckinghamshire with him to see me in Sussex, and I would usually clear his nostril blockage and give him injections of antibiotic, vitamin A, and anti-inflammatory drugs. This resolved the



Dougal sharing Maria's lunch!

problem for a while, but it would return after a few months, and Maria had to make the journey at least half a dozen times in 2000, and similarly through 2001.

In 2001 I admitted him to X-ray his lungs and air sacs, to check for more serious reasons for the recurrent infections, but all was clear. Nevertheless, he and Maria remained regular visitors throughout the early 2000s, and she was very emotionally involved with Dougal, feeling both a responsibility for his long-term care after such a poor early life, and great interest and compassion for the suffering that so many of these creatures go through because of the high-maintenance required to look after these very demanding birds.

In the autumn of 2012, Dougal started to cough. Initially we assumed he was having another of his recurring bouts of upper respiratory infection, but this time he failed to respond to the usual treatment. His cough worsened, he started to regurgitate and to refuse his food. Fearing the worst I took him to my little clinic at

the British Wildlife Centre in Surrey, and after anaesthetising him I examined his throat with my endoscope. There was the terrifying sight of a yellow mass at the fork of the windpipe, where it divided to feed each lung (see part one). Terrifying not only because of the poor prognosis, but also – how was I going to break the news to poor Maria?

I dislodged and removed the lump as best I could, and Dougal recovered quickly from the anaesthetic, his previously rasping breathing immediately improved. I telephoned an anxious Maria with the good news so far, and we started him on some anti-fungal medication. Initially he seemed to respond, but sadly after a few days it was clear that the fungal material was growing back and once again blocking his airway. After sitting up all night with him struggling to breathe, Maria asked me in the early morning to put him to sleep. She was devastated. She had for many years given a loving home to this cockatoo after his poor start being shunted around

several 'owners'. In return he had given her much-needed companionship and support during a difficult period of her life.

A new bird. Move forward a year or so, and a mutual friend who cared for many unwanted birds, took in a mature (about 50 years old) Moluccan cockatoo. This bird had been purchased decades before, and suspected as being a recent import (in the days when it was still legal – and probably taken from its nest as a chick). His owner lived in a flat above a pub, and he apparently never came out of his cage or inter-acted much with humans. The lady subsequently died, and her family had no interest in the bird, so he found his way to our friend. Knowing the story of Dougal, she contacted Maria, who gladly (and bravely!) took him on.

By that time we were together as a couple, and married in 2015. Mindful of Dougal's fate, the 'new' cockatoo - named Lucien – had the best of everything, with a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables, high-quality clean seed mix, organic pellets (on which he was not keen), ultraviolet light, regular spraying with warm water (which he thoroughly enjoyed), and an air filter/ioniser. None of our cockatoos ever ate peanuts (monkey nuts), being aware of the risks of fungal contamination mentioned



Main Picture: Maria with Ernie (R shoulder) and Lucien (L shoulder) on holiday in Cornwall. **Inset:** Ditto in Black Park, Bucks. Lucien enjoying the breeze under his wings, although he never actually flew. Maria regularly answered questions from the enthralled children.



Lucien in full health and display mode, showing off his crest



Maria and Lucien, flanked by Alan and Les Rance, at the Parrot Society stand at Think Parrots show 2019

in part one. Initially, he would not come out of his cage nor interact with people, but over a period of several months, Maria would sit next to the cage, quietly talking to him and offering titbits through the bars. She would leave the cage door open, lying on the floor in front of it, talking to him. One evening, he suddenly launched himself out on to the floor to attack one of

the dog's squeaky toys! He was as surprised as we were, as he then stood stock still, crest up, eyes wide with alarm, then ran towards Maria.

He sought sanctuary and reassurance in her arms, and she was able gently to pick him up and return him to the 'safety' of his home cage. From that point, he became more confident, and would progressively allow Maria to handle and groom him. After 18 - 24 months of such patient work on her part, she had progressed to having him out every evening on her lap for a grooming session, then got him harness trained, and was able to take him out for

walks on her shoulder. We purchased garden aviaries, and in fine weather he was able to spend time outdoors in the fresh air and sunshine. We also acquired a young Long-billed Corella - 'Ernie' - who she also harness trained, and the pair of them became quite a local attraction on country walks, one on each shoulder.

Being a young, hand-reared bird, Ernie was also quite happy to come to me, but Lucien never took to me - perhaps because I periodically had to wrap him in a towel to clip his claws! In the house, they were very territorial, each in their own cage, or coming out one at a time, as they clearly wanted to kill each other if possible! Strangely, though, when out and about on walks, they would happily travel one on each of Maria's shoulders, and when we paused to rest, they would sit on her lap, mutually preening. Lucien even let me stroke him at these times! A happy and fulfilling lifestyle for some ten years, after his miserable early years, and admirable effort on Maria's part in her achievement.

History repeats itself. At the end of September this year, Lucien suddenly seemed quieter than usual, with an ominous change in his voice. He was still eating, with no cough or wheeze, but definitely not his normal self. By the following morning, it was obvious that there was something wrong - his voice was very hoarse, and he was more subdued. By that time, I was retired from avian veterinary practice, with no surgical facilities or licence to prescribe medicines, so we drove all the way to Swindon to see avian and exotics specialist colleague

Tom Dutton. He anaesthetised Lucien and endoscoped his trachea, where he found the dreaded lesion of an aspergillosis granuloma, just like Dougal! However, it was early stages, and Tom was hopeful that anti-fungal medication would deal with it.

We returned home with the patient, ordered a nebuliser on-line, and proceeded to dose him twice daily with a syringeful of medicine, and nebulise him three times daily with a second anti-fungal drug. Initially, he rallied, but sadly over just the next two days he followed the course of aspergillosis toxicity. His legs became weak and his balance unsteady, his head began to tremor, and eventually he lost the use of his legs completely. Just four days after the initial signs of illness, we agreed that he was not going to recover, and I quietly put him to sleep while Maria held him gently in her arms.

Once again, Maria had lost a much-loved companion bird, in almost identical circumstances to her first casualty. Only someone who has gone through such an emotional experience can fully understand how she felt.

