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INTRODUCTION

Cockatoos belong to an order of birds known as the Psittaciformes (parrots). Parrots are widely distributed across the southern hemisphere, reaching their greatest diversity in the tropical forests of South America. They range in size from the tiny Buff-faced Pygmy Parrot (weighing only 10–15 g) to the large Hyacinth Macaw (weighing 1400–1700 g). The basic plumage colour is green, with varying amounts of red, blue and yellow. Parrots have a powerful downward-curving bill and a relatively large head. Their short legs give them a characteristic waddle, while the arrangement of toes on their feet (two forward, two backward) provides strength and dexterity. Their colourful plumage and capacity to mimic human speech have made parrots a popular cage, pet or companion bird around the world. The Psittaciformes have been divided into two families – the Cacatuidae (cockatoos) and the Psittacidae (lories and true parrots).

Twenty-one cockatoo species are currently recognised; most are large stocky birds (length 30–60 cm, weight 300–1000 g). The exception is the Cockatiel, which resembles a medium-sized parrot (length 32 cm, weight 80–100 g). Cockatoos are distinguished by the presence of an erectile crest. Most have black, white or grey plumage and, unlike other parrots, lack violet, blue, green or purple feathers. The pinks in the plumage of a number of species puts them among the most beautiful of the world's birds. They typically have a large robust bill and muscular tongue, which combine to efficiently process the seeds and nuts on which they feed. Cockatoo skulls are reinforced around the eye, to support muscles associated with their bill's sideways movements.

Cockatoos have an essentially Australasian distribution, suggesting that modern species arose after the break-up of Gondwana. Like many other elements of Australasian fauna, cockatoos have not reached the south-east Asian mainland or adjoining islands such as Borneo, Sumatra and Java. Similarly, many typically Asian animals have not penetrated into