

## THE PALM COCKATOO

### AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST PARROT



Photo: "whiskymac"

The Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*), which is also known as the Goliath Cockatoo, is a large smoky-greyish black parrot of the cockatoo family. It is the only member in subfamily *Microglossinae* and monotypic genus *Probosciger*. Its unique position within the cockatoo family has been confirmed by molecular studies (Brown & Toft, 1999, Astuti, 2004?).

The Palm Cockatoo occurs in the rainforests and woodlands of New Guinea and northern Queensland. It is 55-60cm (22-24") in length



AUSTRALIAN RANGE

Map: "kiwifruitboi"

and weighs between 500-1,000gms. It is a distinctive bird with a large crest and one of the largest beaks of any of the parrot family (only the Hyacinth Macaws' being larger). The powerful beak allows them to eat extremely hard nuts and seeds that other species have difficulty utilising. The beak is unusual as the lower and upper mandibles are separated for much of their length, this adaption allows the tongue to hold a nut against the top mandible while the lower mandible works to open it. They have a distinctive red cheek patch that can change colour when the bird is aroused.

The Palm Cockatoo is capable of four different vocalisations, including a "hellow" call that is very human-like. It has been found there are distinct "dialects" throughout the species' range. It has a unique display where the bird (usually the male) holds a large branch with one foot and drums it against a dead bough or tree, thus creating a loud noise that can be heard for up to 100m. It has been hypothesised that the females can assess the suitability of a nesting hollow by the resonance of this drumming display.

Palm Cockatoos lay just one egg and have one of the highest rates of breeding failure of all the parrots. However, this is offset by their very long life-span. Nesting occurs in tree hollows, with a preference for those that are vertical. Fire play an important role in creation of nest hollows, allowing colonisation by microorganisms and termites which enter the tree and start the hollowing process. Cyclones play an important role in the final stage of nest hollow development.

It is still relatively common in Cape York, but is threatened by habitat loss, particularly that caused by bauxite mining around Weipa, and altered fire regimes elsewhere. The Palm Cockatoo is currently evaluated as "Least Concern" on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia