

Caring for Cockatiels

A cockatiel is a small Australian parrot. If you prefer a small bird that may be more affectionate than a larger parrot, does not vocalize loudly, and requires less space, a cockatiel is an excellent choice. Cockatiels are prized throughout the world because of their lovable companionship qualities. They are gentle and easy to breed and enjoy interacting with humans. Cockatiels make soft chirping sounds, whistle (especially the males), and are generally less noisy than most other parrots. Cockatiels are easy to tame as well as inexpensive and simple to maintain; therefore, they are an excellent choice for first-time bird owners.

Biologic Facts

- Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*)
- Average weight range: 2.8 to 4.2 ounces (80 to 120 g)
- Sexual maturity: 6 to 12 months
- Average life span (normal gray color mutation): 15 years
- Maximum recorded life span: 32 years
- Origin: Australia

Behavior

- Cockatiels are relatively quiet; they are better known for whistling than for talking
- Cockatiels that are raised by their parents but also exposed to regular human handling throughout weaning become tamer and better adjusted than cockatiels that are entirely handfed or parent-raised
- Tame birds readily adapt to new surroundings and activities; therefore, early exposure to daily household activities and to other pets is important
- They are intelligent, curious, and easily amused with simple toys; they love to explore their surroundings
- They are very social, requiring regular interaction with people
- They may bond with humans, cage mates, toys, or cage furnishings; courtship, mating behavior, and egg laying commonly result

- Foraging stations, puzzle feeders, and “busy” toys provide necessary environmental enrichment and reduce the chance of feather picking, aggression, or other problems
- Birds with unrestricted access in the home encounter numerous dangers, such as drowning, toxin ingestion, electrocution, traumatic injuries; cockatiels should be confined to their cage or housed in a bird-friendly safe room when not directly supervised

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Diet

- As with all parrot species, a varied diet is recommended for increased nutritional value and psychological well-being
- Seeds are high in fat and low in many essential nutrients
- Vitamin-enriched seeds have a coating on the hulls, which cockatiels usually discard
- Formulated diets are complete; each pellet contains balanced nutrition, preventing a bird from feeding selectively
- The diet should consist of 70% to 80% formulated pellets
- Dark-green vegetables or fruits can make up 10% to 30% of the diet; if fresh food is offered, it should be cleaned from the enclosure daily to prevent spoilage and bacterial growth
- Treats (including seeds) should be limited to only 5% of the diet
- Clean, fresh water should be provided daily, preferably in a sipper bottle that is mounted on the outside of the cage; the tube from the sipper

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bottle that extends into the cage allows the bird access to water but prevents spillage and fecal contamination of the water source

- A cuttlebone or mineral block should be placed in the enclosure for calcium supplementation

Environment

- The enclosure should be as large as possible, allowing the bird to fully extend its wings and flap without touching the sides of the enclosure
- The cage should be clean, secure, safe, and constructed of durable, nontoxic materials, with natural wood perches of various sizes
- To prevent contamination, avoid placing perches directly over food or water
- Access to natural light is preferred; drafty areas should be avoided
- Some birds require a night light to prevent episodes of “night fright”—frantic flapping and vocalization that can occur without provocation
- When a bird is outside its cage, it requires constant supervision for protection from other pets, small children, and household hazards

Preventive Care

- A physical examination is required every 12 months
- Consult a veterinarian with experience in avian medicine if you have any questions or concerns about your bird’s health
- An annual fecal examination should be performed to test for parasites, yeast, and bacteria
- A vaccination for polyomavirus may be required, as directed by your veterinarian
- Blood work may be required annually, as directed by your veterinarian
- The wings and nails must be trimmed as needed

Common Medical Disorders

- Obstetrical problems (excessive egg laying, egg binding, egg-related peritonitis [inflammation of the membrane lining the walls of the abdominal and pelvic cavities], yolk emboli)
- Liver disease
- Kidney disease
- Internal parasites
- Bacterial and yeast infections
- Obesity
- Feather picking
- Broken blood feathers