



Living with Companion Cockatiels



Cockatiels As Pets

Cockatiels have personality, attitude, and agility. Originating from Australia, these birds have become very popular pets. Cockatiels thrive on attention, and social interactions. Many like to be scratched under the chin, have their heads stroked or take part in a sometimes one-sided conversation. Kept as either an individual bird or a pair, cockatiels bring much entertainment into a home. They make excellent first pets and adapt well to apartment living.

Please note: cockatiels are not suitable for young children (less than 6 years of age). Children should always be supervised by an adult, and should never be solely responsible for the care of the bird. Cockatiels will bite if frightened or threatened.

Description

Most cockatiels are 12 – 14

inches long, with the tail making up about half of that size and weigh 75 to 100 grams. Generally, cockatiels are grey and yellow with a beautiful yellow crest on the top of the head. These birds can live from 15 to 20 years. Numerous colour variations and mutations are available, such as a white-faced bird, lutinos, pearl, and pied. Younger cockatiels have stripes on the underside of the wings and tail, which fade with maturity. The males tend to have more colour variations, and a prominent crest. The females maintain the horizontal wing and tail stripes for a much longer period of time.

Cockatiels have limited mimicking ability, but have a wide array of whistles, shrieks, and calls. They can learn to answer the microwave timer, telephone ringer, voices as well as songs on the television or radio. Some birds, with time and training, can become exceptional mimics.

These birds can be kept as individual pets or as a pair. However, to have a tame, trained bird, a single cockatiel makes a better pet, as pairs tend to bond to one another rather than their owners.

Before acquiring a cockatiel,

make sure that the cage and supplies are set-up and ready. This preparation ensures the bird will have an easier transition into the home.

Cockatiel – Proofing

Never allow a cockatiel to fly around the house unsupervised. The kitchen can be a very unsafe environment, with the stove and water filled sink. The bathroom is another potentially dangerous location with a toilet filled with water, sinks, and bathtubs. Always keep the birds away from a wood stove or fireplace. Close outside doors and windows, as well as curtains or blinds to prevent the cockatiel from flying head on into the glass. Electrical cords should be covered or unplugged. Cover any valuable pictures or frames, and remove fragile vases, or collectibles, as it is almost impossible to houstrain a cockatiel. Make sure that ceiling fans are turned off, as the blades make great landing sites.

To catch a cockatiel that has escaped from its cage, turn the lights as dim as possible. The darkness tricks the bird into thinking that it is time to sleep. Corner the bird and cup it in your hands gently but firmly, and return it to the cage. Be aware that if the bird is



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stressed, it may try to bite. If the bird evades your hands, try placing a towel over it, and then scooping up bird and towel.

Dogs and cats may see the flying bird as prey. Ensure that these pets are not present when the cockatiel is released. Also be sure to remove any plants that may be poisonous to birds.

Training and Handling

Hand-fed baby cockatiels are generally more friendly and trusting. When bringing home a baby cockatiel, play with the bird for a short time before placing it in a cage. With older birds, allow them to get used to the cage, and new environment as well as the people of the household prior to handling.

Start by speaking to the bird in a quiet and calm voice. After a while, the cockatiel will become used to the sound of your voice and will learn to answer. To have the bird get used to perching on your hand, try simply placing your hand in the cage several times per day for several days. During this time, do not force the bird to approach your hand, but you may offer treats to coax him over. Some cockatiels have no fear and will immediately come investigate and perch; however, others are timid and require a little more time.

Younger cockatiels go through a

phase where they try to nibble or bite at everything. If the bird is perched on a hand and tries to bite, quickly drop the hand a few inches, imitating an earthquake. Do not attempt to have the bird lose its balance and fall. The objective is to quickly divert the bird's attention with something that is a neutral diversion. If the bird is guarding the cage, do not react. A withdrawn hand indicates to the bird that you did just what it wanted you to do. Most young cockatiels grow out of the phase. An older cockatiel is much more difficult to retrain not to bite. Reconvincing the bird that good things come (such as treats) with people is the objective to adjusting the behaviour.

To have the cockatiel fly around with people in the house, make sure the bird has had time to adjust to its surroundings, and cage. Start by closing off adjacent rooms, and ensuring all doors, windows, and curtains are closed. Simply open the cage door, and the cockatiel will emerge from the cage when it feels ready. Most times, the bird will fly around the room and land on a picture frame, or curtain rod, and look around. Ensure that young children, or pets do not attempt to chase the bird. Allow it to fly around and land where it feels comfortable.





Housing

The largest cage possible is best. The cage should be at least twice the wingspan of the bird, and should be longer rather than taller. A minimum floor space of 18 inches by 18 inches per cockatiel is suggested with a minimum height of 24 inches. Moderately thick wire, and ½ inch wire spacing are advised, as cockatiels will climb around and chew on the bars.



Place the cage in an active area, as cockatiels require constant mental and physical stimulation and love people interactions and socialization. The kitchen should be avoided due to the potential of irritating smoke and fumes from cooking. Do not allow people to smoke around the cockatiel, since the smoke is very irritating to the eyes and respiratory system of most birds.

Avoid placing the cage in direct sunlight, near cold drafts, air conditioners, and fireplaces. Room temperature from 18 – 24 C is ideal. The room should have much natural light, or a full spectrum light source should be used. Cockatiels require 10 – 12 hours of night sleep; otherwise they may become irritable or stressed. Cover the cage at night. Always keep the cage inaccessible to cats, dogs and unsupervised

young children.

Perches of many shapes and sizes give plenty of foot and leg exercise. Use sandpaper perch covers on only one perch as they can cause irritation to the foot. Be sure the sandpaper perch is not on the preferred location in the cage. Natural branches may be used as long as they are cleaned prior to being placed in the cage and replaced regularly. Doweling works well, but lacks grip. Cement or terra cotta perches help wear down nails. Plastic perches can be chewed easily and do not last very long. Place the perches strategically throughout the cage to encourage flight between them, and climbing.

Since cockatiels are ground feeders, and spend much time at the bottom of the cage, the bottom should be lined with newspaper, plain paper, or paper towel for easy cleaning. Cockatiels like to pick things up, and may ingest sand, shavings or kitty litter from the cage bottom and this can cause internal problems. Therefore, a wire mesh or grate should be placed over the lining, so the birds are not in direct contact with the lining or droppings. Always change the lining daily to keep the cage clean.

Toys are essential for cockatiels. There are many different types of bird safe toys available such

as ladders, swings, hanging rings, mirrors, bells and balls. Homemade toys include paper towel or toilet paper rolls, rawhide, clothespins, and wooden blocks. Cockatiels love to pick things up and manipulate them with their bills and feet. Also, toys should be moved around, added and removed frequently to avoid boredom.

Make sure food and water dishes (or a water bottle) are either attached to the side of the cage or made of heavy and solid ceramic. Otherwise, the cockatiel will become skilled at the art of dumping the dishes. The dishes should be large enough to hold 1 cup of food.

A shallow birdbath large enough for a cockatiel provides messy but amusing entertainment. If the cage is not large enough for a full bath, or if the cockatiel dislikes the idea, try using a plant mister spray bottle to lightly wet the bird. Cockatiels should have or use a 'bath' 2-3 times per week.

A cage cover helps to reduce night drafts, and helps to calm a stressed bird; however, they should be cleaned regularly to prevent dirt and dust build up. Since cockatiel cages tend to be large, often they cannot be chained to hang from a ceiling. Therefore, a stand or location, such as a table or dresser top is required.



Diet

Cockatiels require a combination of seeds and pellets. Unlike pellets, seeds do not contain all the necessary nutrients, but stimulate some activity of the bird to be able to break open the shells. If the bird was previously on a seed diet, and you wish to switch to a pellet diet, gradually introduce pellets. This change may take some time (months). A sudden switch could cause the bird to starve. A bird on an all seed diet requires a vitamin powder sprinkled over fresh foods several times per week. Vitamins sprinkled in water can cause bacterial growth. Fresh water should be offered daily.

Fresh vegetables, greens and fruits should also be offered daily: romaine, spinach, carrot tops, dandelion greens, corn, peas, broccoli, apple, pear, melons, and berries.

Unsweetened cereals, such as Cheerios, breads, unsalted nuts, cheese, and scrambled or hard-boiled eggs make great treats.

Supply a mineral block and cuttle bone, to ensure that the cockatiel has calcium and mineral supplementation.

Health

Some cockatiels are purchased with their wings clipped, and

some veterinarians can clip wings if necessary. Clipping prevents the birds from flying and is somewhat controversial. However, depending on the personality of the bird, clipping prevents injury and escape, and makes the birds easier to tame, since the bird is more dependent on the owner. In addition, nails may need to be clipped. A pair of small nail clippers and styptic powder are needed for this. It is easier to restrain the bird in a towel to cut the nails. Always have someone assist. More information can be obtained through consultation with a veterinarian.

Molting occurs naturally at 6 months, 1 year of age and then once every year. A molt generally lasts 4-6 weeks and should not be mistaken for feather picking. Environmental temperatures influence the pattern of a molt.

Occasionally, some female cockatiels will become persistent egg-layers, without the presence of a mate. Obesity is common in older birds; however, diet modifications and exercise generally help to control the weight gain.

Signs of disease or illness in a cockatiel may be indicated by a variety of clinical symptoms: inactivity, closed eyes (most of the time), droopy wings, ruffled

feathers, stops eating and vocalizing, noisy breathing and sneezing, bleeding, weight loss, soiled or pasted vent, changes in the droppings, decreased preening, sits at the bottom of the cage for long periods of time, and self mutilation (feather picking). These symptoms require urgent veterinary attention.

An annual veterinary visit is advisable to ensure that your cockatiel is in optimal health.

Cockatiels and Other Animals

Never mix smaller birds with a cockatiel unless they were raised together. Some birds tend to be territorial and unwilling to accept other birds. A sudden peck from a bill can be fatal to a smaller bird. For the same reasons, do not introduce the cockatiel to a larger bird.

Cats and dogs should never be trusted with any birds or smaller animals. These pets are instinctive hunters, no matter how gentle and playful they may be when supervised with the bird.





Before you Make the Commitment...

- ✓ Cockatiels may require medical care. Have you planned in your budget for emergencies?
 - ✓ If you rent, have you checked to be sure that you are allowed to keep a cockatiel?
 - ✓ What will you do with your cockatiel during vacation time?
 - ✓ Cockatiels generally live from 7 to 10 years. Are you prepared for this commitment?
 - ✓ Young children should not be left unsupervised with cockatiels. Will you have the time to spend with the children and their pets? Will you teach them to treat the birds gently and carefully?
- ✓ Do you have other pets to consider before bringing a cockatiel home?
 - ✓ Cockatiels moult. Are there allergies in your family?
 - ✓ Will a cockatiel fit into your home and lifestyle?

Checklist

Housing

- Adequate sized bird cage (larger the better)
- Heavy food and water dishes (or water bottle)
- Perches of different diameters (natural branches)
- Paper lining for easy cleaning (lines bottom of cage)
- Stand for the cage
- Cage cover

Food

- Cockatiel seed and pellet mix
- Fresh water
- Fresh, washed vegetables and fruits
- Cuttle bone (minerals)
- Mineral block

Supplies

- Multiple toys (swings, mirrors, ladder, bird bath)
- Good book on Cockatiel care
- Nail clippers
- Styptic powder
- Bath dish or plant mister

Vet Care and More

- Annual check-up
- Emergency medical care
- Vacation care

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