

COCKATIEL CARE

The cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) is the smallest bird of the cockatoo family and one of the most popular pet birds in the world. Originally from Australia, they became domesticated and widely known and bred from the 1840s onwards. They are generally friendly gentle birds with good powers of mimicry although are better at imitating whistles and other sounds than human speech. They can live 10-15 years in captivity.

HOUSING

- Cockatiels naturally live in large flocks so will be happiest in a spacious aviary set up. This should be an outdoor enclosure made of strong wire mesh (which should be zinc free), with an easily cleanable floor and plenty of room for the birds to fly around. In addition to the flying area, a sheltered sleeping area should be provided to protect from the worst of the British weather. There should also be the facility to provide supplementary heating in the winter. The enclosure should also provide shade on sunny days. Perches can be placed at varying heights around the enclosure with branches of different diameters providing the most natural set up. It is also particularly important to ensure that the enclosure is secure, both to stop the birds getting out (double security doors are the best way to prevent an escape) and to stop predators getting in.
- Alternatively, if an aviary is not an option or if you wish to tame the birds, they may be housed indoors in a cage set up. Ideally the cage should only be used for housing the bird at night or when unsupervised. A cage set up should also be as large as possible and must allow the bird to stretch its wings in all directions (as an absolute minimum) but ideally large enough to allow flight. The cage should be made of non-toxic material and be zinc free. It should be placed out of direct sunlight and draughts and situated away from any item that may give off toxic fumes. Certain household products such as tobacco smoke, Teflon from non-stick frying pans, air freshener plug ins and deodorants can lead to irritation of the bird's respiratory tract and in some cases can be fatal.
- We recommend changing the perches that are supplied with most cages (usually wooden dowel or plastic) to natural tree branches. Fruit trees are preferred, and these should be washed thoroughly with an appropriate disinfectant before use. Natural tree branches prevent most of the common foot injuries that we see and prevent nail overgrowth. Sanded perch covers should not be used as they simply abrade the feet and do not keep the nails short.
- Ultraviolet lighting is important for birds, being required both for natural behaviour and calcium metabolism. Specific bird lamps are available and have recognised health benefits. A good review of bird lighting can be found on the Arcadia website here: www.arcadiabird.com/guide. A bird lamp should be fitted above the cage to reflect light downwards as a bright light hitting the side of the bird can cause eye irritation.

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- Different toys should be added and changed regularly to provide enrichment (see separate handout on enrichment). It is, however, important to bear in mind that many pet shop toys can be easily demolished, so only sturdy toys should be used. When purchasing toys or cages always make sure that they are “zinc-free” as zinc poisoning is increasingly seen in captive birds. Be careful as some fixings can contain zinc, yet the toy is marketed as zinc free. Household items such as keys, old paintwork, and lead weights can contain heavy metals and be potential sources of toxicity. If planning to be out of the house for a long time, it is also a good idea to leave a radio program on at a low volume to give the birds some stimulation.
- Free flight is an essential requirement and birds should be given the opportunity for exercise daily. Ensure that the room they are allowed to fly around is totally secure with all windows, doors and chimneys blocked off, heaters and fans turned off and any potentially poisonous house plants removed. If started young, birds can be easily trained to perch on a finger and returned to the cage.
- The cage or aviary should be cleaned out at least once a week to help prevent disease and a suitable disinfectant used (such as F10 disinfectant solution).

COMPANIONS

- In general, most birds are social animals and ideally should be paired up with another bird of the same species for lifetime companionship.

WHAT TO FEED

- In the wild, cockatiels will predominantly feed at ground level eating fruits, berries, grass seeds and grain crops. In captivity seed mixes have traditionally been provided, but often provide an inadequate balance of nutrients and allow selective feeding. Good quality complete pellet diets are available which provide a better balance of nutrients than seed mixes, by eliminating selective feeding (please see separate hand out on parrot nutrition).
- For cockatiels we would recommend Harrison’s Lifetime fine or superfine pellets. This should comprise 60-80% of the diet, with the remainder made up of vegetables (eg peas, broccoli, kale, spinach, carrot, sweet potato), a small amount of sprouted seed (see separate handout) and high quality seeds used in very small amounts as treats/training rewards.
- Water should always be available both for drinking, and in a shallow saucer for bathing. This should be changed daily.

ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

We recommend annual health checks for pet birds as medical problems are more easily treated if detected at an early stage – **you can register for automatic reminders**

INSURANCE

We highly recommend that you take out a pet insurance policy. There are a lot of different companies and policies available, and we suggest you contact a number of them for information.