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## Cockatiel Care

### General Information

The cockatiel belongs to the order Psittaciformes, which consists of birds commonly called parrots. The word cockatiel is thought to be an English adaptation of the Portuguese word cacatitho, which means little cockatoo. Specific differences put forth by various experts seem to indicate that the cockatiel lies somewhere between the parrot and cockatoo subfamilies, enjoying habits and characteristics of both.

Cockatiels are native to Australia, where they are called quarrion. They inhabit the interior Australia, and are found in most types of open country. They are found in large numbers in the North. In Southern Australia, they appear to be migratory, arriving in the first weeks of spring and breeding before migrating back to the North. During very dry seasons, their movements can be spectacular and they may appear in coastal areas where they have not been seen for years.

The First Nations of Australia have long hunted cockatiels and their eggs for food. The first European account of cockatiels was from voyagers with Captain James Cook near the eastern coast in 1770. The first successful breeding attempt in captivity was in Germany in the mid 19th century, then at the London Zoo in 1863.

These parrots are found in the wild in pairs and small flocks, and spend most of their time on the ground searching for grass seeds. They are sometimes seen above, scattered on trees in open plains.

In their natural habitat, they have been observed feeding on seeds of mature grasses, herb like shrubs, plants, trees, berries, grain, fruit, acacia seeds, and even mistletoe berries. They also raid standing crops, particularly sorghum. Since cockatiels are acclimated to arid areas, they can go for long periods on little water. The cockatiel speeds along in a straight line and lands by letting itself fall straight down, stopping descent with outstretched wings just prior to hitting the ground.

Their natural enemies include small and medium sized birds of prey, which can swoop down on them while they are feeding on the ground. Their movement in the tall grass reveals their location to predators, and they immediately take to the air at the slightest disturbance, a characteristic probably interpreted as nervousness in captivity. When they are perched in dead branches, they can sometimes be easily approached, as if they are aware of their excellent camouflage.

### General Care

Although cockatiels have been in captivity for many years, they are still creatures of the outdoors and enjoy wide-open spaces. Therefore, their cages should be spacious. They need flying exercise, supervised if outside the cage. If they are allowed exercise time outside the cage, the minimum cage size should be 18"L x 18"W x 18"H. If they are to be confined continually and exercised only in the cage, then it should be at least 36"L x 18"W x 24"H. The cage should have at least two sides of horizontal bars, since cockatiels love to climb and might get their head caught between vertical bars if they slip and fall.

Also, since they love to chew, many experts recommend placing perches of freshly cut hazelnut, willow, or fruit tree wood (untreated with chemicals) to provide them with chewing exercise. Natural wood perches encourage healthy feet; however sandpaper perches can lead to pressure sores and are not recommended. Since these birds are ground feeders, they might benefit from large flat bowls, such as clay flowerpot holders. These can also be used for shallow water baths. If your cockatiel does not enjoy a bath, you may want to mist him two to three times per week to facilitate grooming.

The cage should be placed in a light, well-ventilated room, but not exposed to direct sunlight for lengthy periods. They need to be housed in a room where their owner spends most of the time, since they are very social creatures. The ideal temperature ranges from 40 to 50 degrees Fahrenheit at night and 65 to 80 degrees Fahrenheit during the day.

## Diet

The healthiest diet recommended for cockatiels and most other exotic birds consists of pellets supplemented with various green foods and certain fruits. In season, cockatiels enjoy carrots (usually shredded), pears and apples, as well as berries like rosehips, rowan, and hawthorn as treats. Green foods enjoyed by cockatiels include watercress, thawed frozen peas, green corn, plantain, foxtail, thistles, chickweed, dandelion, carrot leaves, and spinach.

Birds have individual likes and dislikes, and you may have to try a wide variety of foods and presentations to get seed junkies converted. Unfortunately, cockatiels are stubborn when it comes to giving up their seed. If you do supplement with seed, use millet or other types of low fat seeds, and avoid high fat varieties, such as sunflower. It may also help to choose a pelleted food that resembles small seed, such as Harrison's Bird Diet, which comes in a tiny round pellet. Water dishes should be cleaned daily, and plenty of fresh water should be available at all times.

## Health

It is always a good idea to have your veterinarian perform a physical examination on your cockatiel upon purchase. Cockatiels are fairly resistant to disease compared to many other parrots in captivity; however, the following list of problems is not uncommon in these birds.

- Bleeding blood feathers from "night frights"
- Feather picking, especially in the wing web, back, rump, and legs
- Hepatic Lipidosis due to high fat diets or lack of exercise (watch for yellow urates which is the watery portion of the stool)
- Candidiasis, which is a yeast infection commonly found in the oral cavity and crop
- Chlamydia, a liver and respiratory disease that can be carried by cockatiels. This can make them very ill and contagious to other birds when the bird is stressed
- Egg binding, which is many times the result of calcium deficiency, causing a thin-shelled egg. This can be followed by egg yolk peritonitis if left untreated
- Lead or Zinc poisoning from paint, bird toys, etc.
- Teflon toxicity from gaseous fumes created when Teflon is heated to extremely high temperatures
- Roundworms if birds are imported or raised on dirt floor aviaries
- Giardia, a protozoan causing severe diarrhea
- Dogs, cats and ceiling fans!

Watch your cockatiel for signs that might indicate illness. Remember that these signs may be subtle since birds in the wild must hide their weakness so predators do not consider them easy prey. The following are behaviors that might indicate illness.

- Bird is stationary and fluffs feathers out, hiding its head in its plumage (to retain body heat)
- Runny nose or reddened eyes
- Shivering
- Loose droppings without having had a dietary change.
- Excessive scratching
- Sitting lifeless on perch or on cage bottom
- Bulging of crop or unusual odor
- Yellowish lump under skin
- Not eating

Your veterinarian should be your first source for medical information when you are concerned about your Cockatiel or have questions.