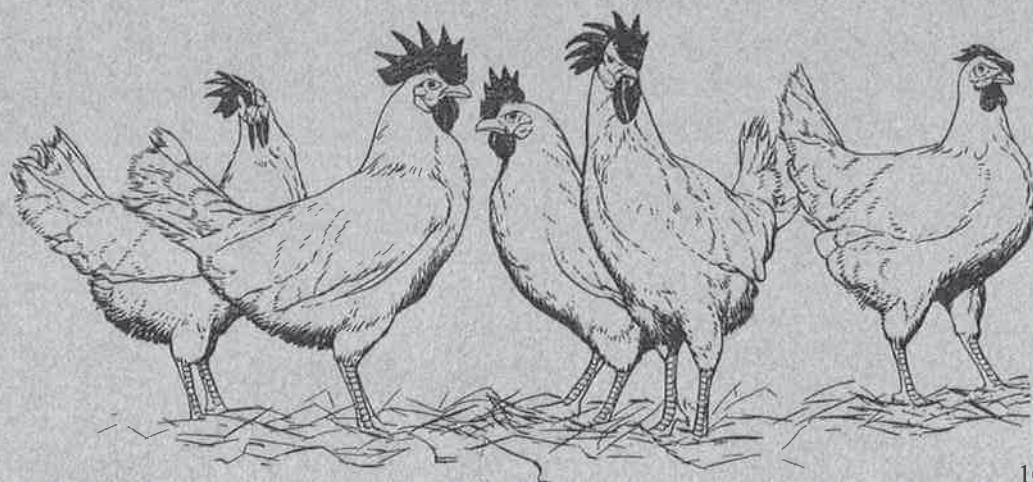


General Care of Pet Birds



GENERAL CARE OF PET BIRDS

The cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) is a small (about 100 grams) parrot, which is native to Australia but has been bred in captivity for generations. Cockatiels have beaks that are well-adapted for chewing and biting, and they are strong flyers. They are also easily tamed and may live up to 20 years. These factors should be considered before buying a pet cockatiel.

Caging

Cockatiels should be kept in cages large enough for the bird to flap its wings. In smaller cages the tips of the bird's feathers may be shredded as the wing tips are beaten against the wire. Cages with horizontal dimensions of at least 18 inches are usually adequate, but, especially if the bird does not get out to exercise, a larger cage is better. There should be one and preferably two perches, a waterer, and a feeder. The floor should be wire under which a tray is placed to catch droppings. Sheets of newspaper are good litter for the tray. They are dry, cheap, and readily available. Do not place the perch directly above the feed or water or they will become contaminated with droppings.

Feeding

There are several feed companies that offer complete diets for cockatiels in a crumbled or pelleted form. These diets require no extra supplements to assure that your pet gets all the nutrients it needs. Often a mix of seeds is fed to pet cockatiels. This is available in pet shops in small bags for the pet owner. The pellets or seeds can be placed in the feeder and should be available to the bird at all times. Be aware that seeds have hulls which cockatiels remove when they eat. These hulls can pile up in the feeder and give the impression that the feeder is full of seeds. A feeder full of hulls contains no food for the cockatiel, and eventually the bird will starve unless the feeder is filled with seed. If you are not sure whether your feeder is full of seed or hulls, simply blow on the feed. The hulls will be easily blown away while the seed remains. In a similar way, some birds will not eat the powdery remains of the pelleted diets, so they may need to be removed and new pellets added.

While a crumbled or pelleted diet alone is adequate for long-term maintenance of a cockatiel, a seed diet is not. The nutrient requirements of an adult, non-breeding bird are low, but there are some essential trace nutrients which are lacking in seed alone. There are several approaches to supplying these trace nutrients. One is to buy a supplemented seed mix in which some seeds are coated with a mix of trace nutrients. Another is to add nutrients in the form of water soluble premixes to the water once or twice a week. These premixes are available in pet stores. A third method is to vary the bird's diet by feeding fruits and vegetables. All three of these methods can work for a pet bird. With the premix method it is important to clean the waterer after—but no longer than one day after—adding the premix to avoid bacterial growth in the waterer. When the seed diet is supplemented with other foods, it is important to be sure that the bird is eating the added food. If it is not then try another method. When supplementing the seed diet avoid drastic, sudden changes in the bird's total diet. Some birds will reject the supplements and others may eat to excess and develop digestive problems. This problem is easily avoided by keeping the feeder full of seeds and limiting the amount of supplemental feeding.

Fresh, clean water is also essential for the good health of a pet bird. The water should be changed daily.

Environment

A bird in a cage has no chance of changing its environment by moving to a more comfortable place as a bird in the wild can. This makes it important to put the cage in a place where the bird can be comfortable. The cage should be placed in a draft-free area, out of direct sunlight. Avoid placing a birdcage near south windows, particularly in winter; air conditioners; heaters;

kitchens, unless the bird is away from sources of heat such as stoves, ovens, microwave exhausts, refrigerator backs, and sinks full of hot water; vents; open windows and doors; and hot lights or electrical equipment such as televisions.

Exercise, Escape, and Hazards

You may often want to take your pet out of its cage to play with it or let it fly around. There can be problems with allowing the bird out of its cage unless the bird is watched and some precautions are taken.

Since cockatiels are strong flyers, they often escape out open windows or doors. Obviously, the doors and windows should be shut if the bird is out, or the bird's wings should be clipped so it cannot fly. Some birds still unfamiliar with the area where they fly will fly into windows or mirrors and injure themselves. This can be avoided by closing drapes and avoiding rooms with mirrors.

Birds that have clipped wings have a different kind of potential problem. They cannot fly to avoid danger. These dangers can include other pets such as cats and dogs and the possibility of being stepped on. These hazards must be considered for your individual circumstances. The most important thing you can do is to keep track of your pet and intervene when a hazardous situation arises.

Chewing is a major concern. Cockatiels will chew almost anything. Some of the things they chew will be damaged or may hurt the bird. You must use your judgement here, but it is best simply to watch the bird. If you cannot watch it, put it back in its cage.

Health Care

Taking on the responsibility of owning a cockatiel also means providing proper veterinary care should the need arise. Cockatiels are generally very healthy, but if a bird appears listless, is fluffed up for long periods and/or is not eating its normal amount of feed, a visit to a veterinarian is advised. If you do not have a regular veterinarian, you should try to find one who has experience with birds.

Summary

Providing the essentials for a pet cockatiel as discussed above should result in having an entertaining, affectionate avian companion for many years. For more information on such topics as breeding your pet cockatiel and learning about various color mutations, you may want to contact a local bird club in your area or write one of the two national cockatiel organizations listed below:

National Cockatiel Society
Route 3, Box 5595
Berryville, VA 22611

American Cockatiel Society
P.O. Box 111
Marlin, Texas 76661

Acknowledgments: Psittacine Research Project, Department of Avian Sciences, University of California, Davis, CA 95616