

COCKATIELS AS PETS

Choosing a bird - or two

The cockatiel is a small parrot that comes from Australia. In the wild it lives in flocks, feeding mainly on seeding grasses. Cockatiels make delightful pets, and these days are bred in a number of colour mutations. Some are hand reared - and these hand reared youngsters make particularly good pets, as they are already tame when they are sold.

Because cockatiels are social birds, living in large flocks in the wild, they do need other bird company in captivity - and so think in terms of buying two rather than one. A pair of hand reared young birds will remain tame and sociable (so long as they are given plenty of time and attention) and will be company for each other when you are out of the house.

Never buy an adult bird out of an aviary if you want a tame and contented pet - birds that have grown up in the comparative freedom of an aviary with lots of other birds as company find it very hard to adapt to solitary cage life.

Choosing a cage

A cage for a pair of cockatiels should be large enough to allow plenty of movement and a short flight from one end to another. Put the cage reasonably high up at the side or in a corner of the room, so the birds can feel they have a little seclusion. Keep caged birds away from gas appliances or the cooker, and if possible do not allow smoking near the birds - their respiratory systems are delicate and easily damaged by smoke.

Furnishing the cage

The best perches to use are natural branches taken from fruit or willow trees. Wash off any wild bird droppings before use, and replace the branches regularly. Natural perching varies in texture and diameter, and is much easier on the birds' feet than the ridged plastic perching that is sold with most bird cages.

Young birds will often enjoy toys, but don't put so much into the cage that the birds have no room for movement! Cockatiels often enjoy toys that can be destroyed such as cardboard tubes and fibre egg boxes!

Feeding

Cockatiels should have a varied diet based on a good quality cockatiel seed mix. They also need extra protein, and this is best supplied in the form of the egg food or rearing food that is sold in pet shops. This should be given to all birds from time to time, but daily to young birds, sick birds, or birds that are moulting (usually in late summer) or breeding.

You can also offer lettuce, dandelion, groundsel, watercress - any green vegetable.

Some also enjoy apple, carrot and other fruits and vegetables. Encourage your cockatiel to take a variety of fresh food.

You should also make sure that grit and cuttlefish bone are available for your birds - though some will use them and some won't!

Common problems

Most of the common problems in cockatiels arise from a diet that is not quite as it should be. Vitamin A deficiency is common if the bird is on an all-seed diet. The first signs are swollen eyelids and watery eyes. Calcium deficiency is often seen in hen birds that, when they feel the breeding season has arrived, start to lay egg, whether or not they have a mate or a nestbox. The important thing is not to take the eggs away. Give her a box to sit in, and leave the eggs with her. She will lay a clutch and sit on them for a while, then feel she has done her duty and leave them. If you take the eggs away she will keep laying more and more and deplete her body reserves of both protein and calcium.

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