

Cockatiels

By Catherine Love, DVM

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Natural History

Cockatiels (*Nymphicus hollandicus*) are a species of small-medium parrots native to arid regions of Australia. They are the smallest members of the cockatoo family and the only species in their genus. Wild cockatiels live in small groups or pairs, but large flocks may gather around a single water source. These birds prefer relatively open environments, including dry grasslands and sparse woodlands. They are nomadic, traveling great distances to forage for food and water. Cockatiels are the most popular pet bird in the US, and one of the most popular pet birds in the world. They are considered “Least Concern” by the IUCN.

Characteristics and Behavior

Cockatiels are cute, charismatic, and relatively small. This makes them desirable in the pet trade. Wild-type cockatiels are grey with a yellow head and orange-red cheeks, but there are numerous morphs that have been developed in captivity. Cockatiels possess a set of long feathers on their head called a crest, which will change position in response to their mood. Alert or curious birds will stick their crest straight up, whereas defensive birds will flatten their crest to their head and hiss with an open beak. Cockatiels generally bond strongly with their owner, but often do not take well to strangers. Rather than squawking, cockatiels tend to whistle and chirp. Males are known to be more inclined to talk or whistle than females, but both sexes can learn to mimic sounds to some extent. Cockatiels are generally considered quieter than many other parrot species, but they are still capable of making a great deal of noise. Cockatiels are easier for novice owners to handle, but like all parrots they require extensive care and attention to remain healthy. Despite being readily available at most pet stores, they should not be considered low-maintenance pets.

Lifespan

15-20 years.

Adult Size

75-120 grams.

Housing

Caging for any bird should be as large as possible. At a minimum, birds should be able to fully extend their wings and not damage their feathers on the ceiling or sides. They should be able to fly in a horizontal plane from perch to perch, and have at least 3x the length of their head to tail in height. A recommended minimum cage size for a single cockatiel is 24" long and wide, with length more important than height. The smaller the cage, the more out of cage time a bird will need. Bars should be no more than ½" apart and horizontal to allow climbing. Cages that are constructed or painted with lead, zinc, galvanized metal, or other heavy metals can be very toxic for birds and should be avoided.

Numerous perches of varying size should be provided throughout the enclosure at different heights. Different types of toys and enrichment items should be provided and rotated. Toys can be store bought or homemade but need to be bird-safe. Cardboard, wood, and shreddable materials are popular with birds. No bedding is needed for birds but if it is used, avoid cedar and pine as these can cause respiratory irritation. Mirrors are not recommended as they can encourage inappropriate reproductive behavior and egg laying. Food and water dishes should be ceramic and kept clean.

Feeding

Wild cockatiels are granivores, meaning they primarily consume seeds and grain. This has led to the assumption that cockatiels should be fed mostly seed diets in captivity. However, wild cockatiels consume a large variety of seed types that we cannot accurately replicate in captivity. Captive bird seed diets tend to be too fatty for pet birds that are not flying great distances to forage, and also tend to be deficient in nutrients. Vitamin A deficiency is common in birds kept on a seed diet. Therefore, a balanced, uniform, pelleted diet is recommended instead to keep birds lean and healthy. If birds are fed a mix of seeds and pellets they are more likely to pick out the tasty seeds and leave the healthier pellets.

Therefore, seeds should only be offered in very limited quantities, no more than 5-10% of the diet. A balanced pelleted diet should comprise the majority (at least 60%) of a cockatiel's diet. 20-25% of their diet should be fresh vegetables, and 5-10% fresh fruits. A maximum of 5% of the bird's diet can include treats for training such as commercial treats, dried fruit, macadamia nuts, pasta, eggs, walnuts, cashews, seed-based treats, or brown rice. It is recommended to encourage foraging behavior rather than have captive parrots eat from bowls. Recommended brands for bird food include Lafeber, Harrison's, Zupreem, and Roudybush.

Appropriate vegetables: Peppers, squash, cooked beans, broccoli, zucchini, pumpkin, peas, leafy greens, sprouts, cauliflower, and celery.

Appropriate fruits: Apple, banana, strawberries, grapes, melon, pineapple, berries, oranges, peaches, pears.

Water

Fresh water should always be available.

Sexing

It is very difficult to sex juvenile cockatiels under 9 months of age. Juvenile birds and females will both have bars under their tail feathers. Young birds also have yellow spots under their wings that will fade by 9 months as well. Males also tend to have more intricate whistling and mimicking abilities, and generally also have brighter head and cheek colors. Different morphs have unique patterns that may make them difficult to sex without a DNA blood test.

Handling

Cockatiels should be handled gently and consistently from a young age to acclimate them to humans. These birds are quite fragile, to the point that stressful handling can be deadly. Birds move their keel (breastbone) in and out to breathe, so it is important to never squeeze a bird as this can disrupt airflow. Practice asking birds to voluntarily step up onto fingers and hands to make handling easier. Handling sessions should be positive and low stress. Many birds can be desensitized to handling by offering their favorite treat. Cockatiels may bite when scared or stressed. They are not large enough to do serious damage but their bite can pinch and cause small wounds.

Grooming

Birds need their nails trimmed once or twice per month. Start with early desensitization to the nail trimmers as this is a common source of stress for birds and their owners. Birds with beak deformities may need corrective trimming from a veterinarian. It is recommended to not trim a bird's wings, as this is a very good source of exercise and enrichment. If a bird needs its wings trimmed for safety reasons, this should also be done by your veterinarian to ensure the trim is done safely. Never have a young bird's wings trimmed as this can cause significant behavioral issues.

Enrichment

All parrots need extensive enrichment to remain mentally and physically sound. In the wild, parrots spend the majority of their time foraging. This should be replicated in captivity by providing food in puzzle feeders or in hidden areas so the bird has to work for their food. These puzzles can be homemade or purchased. Birds that have never had to work for their food may need simple puzzles to start, such as a box full of crumpled paper.

Another excellent source of enrichment for birds is training. Parrots are very intelligent and can learn different kinds of tricks. Training is not only important for teaching a bird husbandry behaviors (such as stepping up, accepting grooming, etc) but it is also fun! Get creative, and always use positive reinforcement to ensure the bird is having fun. Birds should also have numerous toys always available in their cage. These toys should be rotated to prevent them from becoming boring. Birds enjoy shredding things, including cardboard, paper bags, finger traps, and paper. Parrots may enjoy dog toys or cat toys, but care should be taken to prevent ingestion of plastic. Enrichment needs to be provided daily, and old toys should be switched out every so often to prevent the bird from becoming bored. Out of cage time is another important aspect of exercise and enrichment for birds. A bird that spends too much time in their cage is prone to behavioral issues.

Zoonosis

Parrots can carry a disease called psittacosis, which can cause serious respiratory symptoms in humans. This disease is spread in respiratory secretions. Birds may be asymptomatic shedders.

Health

Parrots are experts at hiding illness so it is important to watch your bird's behavior for any changes. Birds on all seed diets tend to be prone to obesity, liver issues, and beak overgrowth. Female cockatiels may have issues with egg laying, so it is important to not accidentally encourage inappropriate reproductive behavior. Only pet your bird on the head, as this is considered friendly behavior, whereas petting them elsewhere on their body can cause inappropriate reproductive behavior. Covering birds at night for a total of 12 hours of darkness can also help prevent egg binding and inappropriate reproductive behaviors.

Sources and Further Reading:

- AAV Companion Bird Series: Cockatiels
- <https://lafeber.com/pet-birds/species/cockatiel/>

- <https://www.unusualpetvets.com.au/caring-for-your-cockatiel/>
- <https://vcahospitals.com/know-your-pet/cockatiels---general-information>
- <https://www.psittacology.com/caring-for-a-cockatiel/#more-1706>
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- <http://www.goodbirdinc.com/parrot-profiles-cockatiel.html>