

# Getting Started Breeding Cockatiels

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**B**reeding Cockatiels can be a fun and interesting hobby for the family or individual. Many who first consider trying this hobby will do so as a spur of the moment or on an impulse decision without thinking about the future of their breeding program. If you are really considering trying this interesting hobby there are a few basic steps you should first consider before "Getting Started Breeding Cockatiels."

## Selecting Breeders

The first step should be selecting a good breeding pair. As I was told many years ago when I began breeding canaries and Cockatiels, "Like begets like." This I feel is one of the most important pieces of advice that can be given to the novice breeder. A good example is easily seen in the Lutino mutation. The common bald spot is a genetic fault. Which means that if your Lutino male or hen has a bald spot the possibility that all their offspring will also have this trait is extremely likely, possibly even more extensive than the parents. They in turn will pass this trait onto their future offspring. As each generation passes on this trait the genetic fault will be intensified. Another example can be seen with the newer mutations of Pastel, Yellowcheek, Olive (Emerald), and the combinations of these mutations. Anytime a new mutation is formed the beginning stock is small, if not tiny, compared to other mutations that have been well established. Many will breed these mutations to take advantage of the prices that new mutations sell for without much consideration to the future viability and size of the offspring. So you may now be asking how do I get started breeding Cockatiels?

First, seek out a reputable breeder for your first purchase. Do not be tempted by the pet store Cockatiel, if you are truly interested in raising good quality birds. This is the first mistake that many first time breeders make which will affect their ability to produce good quality babies in the future. Most pet stores will not be able to give you any background on the birds. In many instances the pet store will not even be able to tell you how old the birds are or most importantly if they are related. By now you are asking "Okay, how do I know if the breeder is reputable?" A reputable breeder will be able to discuss the parents, grandparents and most likely great grandparents of the birds you are considering. He or she will be able to provide you with instructions on feeding, caging and basic care. Your reputable breeder will also be willing to answer future questions, within reason, as you progress with your learning and breeding of your new birds. A good way to find a reputable breeder is to look for those who exhibit Cockatiels. (Yes, there are bird shows!) Cockatiel judges and advanced exhibitors who are members of a recognized international society will be a wonderful source of not only information but possibly for your first purchase.

## Preparing Your Birds for Breeding

After selecting a pair of birds your next step will be preparing them for breeding. The quarantine period of 30-45 days will give your new additions time to acclimate to their new surroundings, diet, and caging. During this time you can prepare the needed items for breeding. For every pair you set-up for breeding you will need a breeding cage, nest box, food and water bowls, mineral or cuttlebone, a supply of daily food items, leg bands, a record book to record your babies for future reference, and proper lighting, which for breeding birds should be 13-15 hours of light daily. If your birdroom is downstairs the ideal type of lighting would be Chroma 50 or 75 tube lights, Vita Lights also has a full spectrum light bulb that will simulate outside day light.

## Breeding Cages

The breeding cage should be as large as you can possibly supply. Many breeders use cages that are two feet by two feet by three feet long. These cages are of course "home made." If you are interested in making your own cages the American Cockatiel Society's web site at <http://www.acstiels.com> has a very helpful article on how to build cages to what ever size you need. These cages are not decorative but are extremely functional. Many pet stores may stock Prevue 123 or 125 cages. These cages are a good size for a beginner's first purchase.

## Nest Boxes

After you have your breeding cage your next step will be purchasing a nest box. The most readily available nest box will be wooden and will measure about 12 inches tall by 10 inches deep with a 3-inch round hole at the front of the box. (This hole allows your breeding pair access to the inside of the box.) The nest box should also have an inspection door either on the top of the box or on the backside of the box. The inspection door serves as a way to check on the pair as well as for removing baby birds for handfeeding.

The drawback to using this type of nest box is cleaning after breeding season. Let me warn you now, the cleaning of the nest box is a difficult chore, unless you decide to discard and purchase new nest boxes for each breeding season. (A word of caution, the nest box should not be cleaned while the pair is nesting or feeding babies.) Here in my home, after raising Cockatiels for 20+ years, when breeding season ended my family would disappear when they saw the nest boxes coming down. The nightmare of cleaning and sterilizing the wooden boxes for next year use is one of the most time consuming jobs of raising Cockatiels. If you put up more than a few pair you either make the decision to throw the boxes away and make new ones or resort to the easy way out, buy new nest boxes from someone who has the time and equipment to make them. Just thinking about how dirty the boxes get

during breeding season and how much trouble it will be to make sure they are totally clean for next year is enough to make a dedicated breeder cry out for help. If your family is like mine, your cries will fall on deaf ears! A familiar comment I would hear was "you want me to clean that with my *hands* ?!"

Here in my aviary we have changed several years ago to a nest box holder and heavy-duty cardboard box. The nest box holder is made of plywood, the edges are sanded and the wood is painted with an enamel or oil based paint so the wood is sealed. Occasionally the birds will chew the bottom of the cardboard box and the holder will get a little dirty, but since the wood has been sealed, clean-up is very simple. The holders are held on the breeding cage fronts by using either a heavy-duty cup hook or a clothes hanger cut to the proper length and shaped into an S hook. Storage is very easy also, two holders will fit into the space that one nest box usually would take up. The nest box is a 12 inch square heavy gauge cardboard box, which fits snugly into the holder. The cardboard box can be found at most box supply companies, I have also found the same cardboard box at Office Depot. Remember to cut an entry hole for the birds to enter the box and an inspection door into the back of the cardboard box. The inside of all nest boxes should be lined with 1-2 inches of pine shavings. This layer of shavings will help stabilize the eggs as well as absorb the droppings from the chicks.

Another plus to this type of nest box is there is no need for extra note cards to write down when eggs were laid and the due date for hatching, you can write it right on the box! Now for the greatest part of this new invention, when the babies are ready to be pulled for hand feeding or when they have fledged, you take the cardboard box out of the holder and throw it away. For the next clutch insert a new cardboard box into the holder and you are all set, no mess, no fuss.

I can hear you asking what about the birds chewing through the card-

board? It does happen, mine usually add the shredded cardboard into the pine shavings. Occasionally, I will get a pair who try to chew through the back of the box, when this happens I get out the duct tape and simply tape over the holes, if they chew too much I simply put a new cardboard box into the holder and discard the chewed box. The cardboard boxes are stored flat so the space they take up is also minimal. Remember to make sure you store your cardboard boxes in an area that is protected from water, ants, and mice. It is a good idea to store the cardboard boxes outside of the breeding room also. This will prevent the boxes from becoming dusty or contaminated with bird droppings.

### **Breeding**

Once your cage is set-up it is time for the pair of birds to be placed in the breeding cage. During mating, supply your pair with a well balanced diet, as suggested by the breeder that you purchased the birds from, and some privacy. The male will enter the box first, he will inspect the box and make sure he approves of the nesting site. He will then begin to "invite" the hen into the box. He will tap on the box, chew the wood or cardboard, and make low chattering calls.

### **Eggs**

Once the hen accepts the invitation into the box your pair should start the laying process. Barring any problems, your hen should lay 3-6 eggs, one every other day. After she has laid her eggs she and her mate will start the incubating process. It is helpful to make a note of the date that the first egg was laid. (With the cardboard nestbox this note can be made right on the box.) Normal incubation is 18-21 days after the pair has started incubation, which is usually after the third egg is laid. You will notice that the male will sit in the nest box during part of the day while the hen eats and rests outside the nest box. The hen will go back into the nest box when the male comes out to eat and in the evening she will sit on the eggs all night as the male guards the nest box opening. Many good breeding pairs will share the

incubating chore, sitting together in the box most of the day. Coming out only to eat and relieve themselves.

### **Babies**

When the chicks start to hatch it is very important to continue feeding a well balanced diet and to replenish the food during the day. When your baby birds are around 10-14 days of age they should be banded with a closed traceable band. This helps to identify the babies not only to their parents but serves as a record keeping aid for you and those who purchase birds from you. My choice of course is the American Cockatiel Society's closed, traceable leg bands, which should be ordered six weeks before you have babies ready for banding. AFA also has closed traceable bands available, for all species not only Cockatiels. Whichever society you choose to purchase your bands from you can be assured that your babies will be traceable back to you as the breeder.

If you intend to handfeed your newly hatched chicks the best age for removing them from the nest box is when they are 2-3 weeks old. The American Cockatiels Society's web site has a very helpful article on handfeeding. You can read this article at <http://www.acstiels.com/articles.html>. This is also an opportune time to record the band numbers on your pedigree cards or record book.

If you decide to allow the parents to raise their babies they will need to remain with the parents until they are around 6-7 weeks old. Before you remove the parent-raised babies from the breeding cage make sure they are eating on their own.

### **After the Breeding Season**

Most breeders will allow their birds to raise two clutches of babies. After your pair of breeding birds has raised their babies for the season they should be separated until next breeding season. Allowing your hens and males to rest and put back on weight that they have lost during breeding will help to assure you of another successful breeding season. Here in my

aviary hens and males are placed in large flights according to their sex, hens in one cage and males in another, but for the beginning hobbyist another cage will work just fine. Leave the male in the breeding cage (take the nest box down) and remove the hen to a new cage. Your pair may call to each other for a while but they will soon enjoy the rest from each other. Next breeding season if you liked the babies that this pair produced you can pair them again. If you have since purchased other Cockatiels (as most of us do), you may wish to pair the hen or male with a different mate. If you separated your birds after breeding you will be able to do this without any problems. If you allowed them to stay together they may not accept a new mate. Have no fear, Cockatiels do not bond for life as do swans. This separation will not in anyway harm your birds.

Now for a word of warning, the most common mistake that novice breeders make is thinking that their breeding birds can be both parents and pets. It is the rare exception to the rule when we find a hen or male that can be both. In order for mating and incubation to be successful the birds must remain together so they can bond. Most pets that are used for breeding will lose their interest in you as a companion and may become mean and nippy after they are successful in raising babies. It should also not be expected that your pet can be used one time as a breeder, "just to let him or her have one nest of babies," and then be expected to return to a sweet, cuddly pet. In some cases handfed birds are so bonded to the human they will not identify another Cockatiel as a mate in this case you will not be successful in mating this bird.

I hope my article has helped you in Getting Started Breeding Cockatiels. Good luck ❖

*Debbie Maneke has been raising birds for 25 years. During this time she has raised Canaries, Cockatiels, Lovebirds and Pionus Parrots. You can visit her personal web site at <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Grove/2811/index.html>*

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