

Alternative Nest Boxes for Cockatiels

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In the summer of 2001 we moved to a new house. I decided to redesign how my Cockatiels were set up, going from stacked cages, to larger suspended cages in a single row. All the cages would open into a long narrow roofed safety area that would also shelter the nest boxes. I also decided to replace some of the wooden boxes with cardboard boxes. I wasn't sure how this would work out as the cardboard boxes are much smaller than the Cockatiel boxes I was using.

My initial plan was to set up two pairs of Cockatiels as an experiment. In order to do this I modified the cages to include a wire box, slightly larger than the cardboard nest box, open on one end and hung in the upper right hand corner of the cage. This permitted the nest boxes to be slid into place, inspected, or removed without having to open the cage. It also made the nest box difficult to reach if the birds decided to chew them up from the outside, except in the immediate area of the entrance hole. When it actually came to putting pairs in these cages, I decided to set up one pair of Lovebirds and one pair of Cockatiels.

At first I had a number of concerns. Primarily my concerns were for how the Cockatiels would accept the boxes. I was already using English Budgerigar style boxes for my lovebirds, so my only concern was for durability, and I felt the wire enclosure around the box would be adequate to prevent them turning the box into nesting material. This assumption proved correct and the Lovebirds have been happily using the cardboard boxes without any problems.

However I did have a number of concerns about using an English Budgerigar style nest box for Cockatiels. The conventional boxes I

was using measured 9 X 10 inches (interior) providing 90 square inches of nest space. The cardboard boxes only measure 6 X 10 inches (interior) and nearly half of that is taken up by the entrance platform, leaving 36 square inches for nest space (the height wasn't a concern as my conventional boxes were only one inch higher than the new boxes). My other concerns were durability, would the birds reduce the boxes to shreds, and changing from a vertically oriented box with the entrance directly into the nest area, to a horizontally oriented box with the entrance offset to the side onto a platform.

As things turned out I need not have been worried. Durability was better than I expected. The birds had little interest in chewing up the box. The male did modify the entrance hole to a downward pointing tear drop shape, (which he has done with each replacement box) but otherwise has not damaged the box at all. Nor need I have worried about the change in dimensions or the orientation. In fact I soon found that the new boxes appear to offer significant advantages over conventional Cockatiel nest boxes, primarily due to their style rather than the material from which they are made.

When I selected the pair of Cockatiels to set up, I decided on a pair that were prolific breeders. Both birds had strong parenting instincts, but were clumsy in the nest. Both were young birds, it was the second breeding season for them. In the previous year they had laid three clutches of 5-7 eggs all of which were fertile. However in the first and third clutch the eggs were repeatedly scattered when both parents would attempt to sit the eggs resulting in the loss of several eggs. They also exhibited problems with keep-

ing the chicks together and with trampling chicks. So, though in each clutch five chicks were hatched, only 11 of the 15 survived to fledge. And two of those were removed and placed with another pair to raise. I was hopeful that the new boxes would resolve these problems, but far from confident.

I introduced the Cockatiels to their new cage and nest box on June 22, 2001. They spent the first three days settling in and on the 4th day I noticed the male beginning to explore the nest box. By the 6th day he had modified the entrance hole and the following day I saw the female enter the box. On July 4th the hen laid the first of seven eggs.

As before, all eggs were fertile, but I removed two and placed them with another pair to reduce overcrowding when they hatched. It quickly became obvious that at least the problem of both birds trying to sit the eggs at the same time had been solved. Instead of both being in the nest box when it was time to change, the exchange of duties was taking place at the nest box entrance, with the sitting bird exiting the box before the other entered.

The change to a horizontal orientation also eliminated the disturbance of the eggs during the change while the reduced nest area insured that the eggs remained closely bunched at all times. Up to this point things seemed to go very well, but the proof would be in the hatch.

On July 28th the first egg hatched and the last hatched on Aug. 2nd. Five baby Cockatiels were now in the nest, tightly huddled in the center of the 36 square inch nest area.

I monitored the progress of this clutch with interest. During the third week I found it necessary to change the next box completely as the cardboard was becoming fouled. The change did not appear to cause any disruption, other than the male once again modified the entrance hole to a downward pointing tear drop shape. As the chicks grew, the box became increasingly crowded, but

all were being well fed and developing normally, so I decided to let things run their course.

By the middle of September the last of the five chicks had left the nest box and the hen immediately went to nest again, laying her first egg before I had even changed the box. Once again there was no apparent disruption when I changed the box and moved her egg to the new box. Three additional eggs were laid over the next four days, and once again all proved fertile. Again all went well and all four chicks successfully fledged.

At this point I did not replace the nest box when I removed the old one until the weather began to turn cold around the 1st of January. The pair went to nest again and laid a clutch of five eggs, of which four were fertile. During the next six weeks we had very cold nights, with the temperature reaching as low as 22°F. Since my Cockatiel building is not heated and the cages are open to the outside, I fully expected to lose some eggs and perhaps some babies

to the cold. I certainly expected to lose eggs in the cardboard nest box as that cage is the most exposed of all to winter weather.

To my surprise, while I did lose a few eggs and two chicks in the conventional boxes, all the eggs in the cardboard box survived. At this writing three have hatched and the fourth is pipped.

As spring arrives I will be changing my other Cockatiel pairs over to the cardboard English Budgerigar style boxes. The advantages of the style are just too great: The parents sit tighter due to the reduced nest area, there is little or no disturbance or scattering of the eggs when the parents enter or leave the box, squabbles between parents take place outside the box, chicks stay together, smaller chicks don't get pushed into corners where they can be forgotten, parents spend more time in the box after the chicks have begun to feather.

Additionally, as mentioned in my previous article, being dispo-

able, the cardboard boxes provide improved sanitation, and are more mildew resistant than conventional wooden boxes.

There are disadvantages. The cost of using them is higher, roughly double as I get an average of four uses out of a conventional box before weather and cleaning take their toll and I replace it. I have found it requires eight cardboard boxes to supply the same number of clutches at a cost of \$2.50 per box assembled or \$2.00 unassembled.

The Cardboard boxes also require the addition of wire protection to prevent or reduce chewing damage. The other disadvantage is disposal. For small breeders with only a small number of pairs the boxes can simply be disposed of in the regular household trash. Large breeders might have difficulty disposing a large number of boxes each week.

For more information on cardboard nest boxes including where to obtain them contact:

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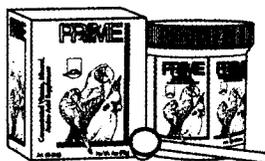
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