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# A True Beginner's Guide to Raising Cockatiels

by Meg Fisher  
West Los Angeles, California

I am writing this article because I am not an expert on cockatiels. This may sound strange, but it really does make sense. I believe it is often difficult for an expert to think like a beginner and thus explain things in a way a beginner will easily understand. It can be a real challenge to "unlearn" advanced concepts in order to teach someone who is not yet familiar with the basics.

I started out as a beginner in aviculture in my senior year of college at the age of 21. Since I never had a pet bird as a child and never knew anyone who did, my only previous exposure to birds was at the zoo and in pet stores. I started working part-time in a pet shop and it didn't take long to get hooked on birds. There was a gorgeous pair of Pied Peachfaced Lovebirds in the shop that I could no longer live without and my life has never been the same!

I immediately contracted "parrot fever" and wanted at least one of each kind of bird in the shop! Next I took home a normal grey male cockatiel. "Keegan" means little and fiery and he sure is. He was the best whistler in the store and I just had to have him. He quickly learned to say "hello" and "pretty bird" and won his way into my heart.

Not knowing that cockatiels make great pets as single birds, I figured Keegan must be lonely. Naturally, I had to get him a "friend" so I brought home Julia, a beautiful pied female. I did not even know she was a female; I just chose her because she was the prettiest cockatiel in the shop. Still being ignorant about breeding birds, I put Keegan and Julia together in a cage. They bonded very quickly and someone suggested I give them a nest box as a warm place to sleep at night. I didn't know any better! As you might imagine, it didn't take long for them to start mating. What a shock that was for me! I had no idea how birds reproduced and they put on an entertaining show, totally unaffected by an audience.

Shortly after Keegan and Julia started mating, I disrupted them and

moved from rural Illinois to Los Angeles. I had nine birds by this time, including an African grey and a cockatoo. Keegan and Julia didn't take long to adjust to their new home and before I knew it they had eggs in the nest! Fortunately, I had joined a local bird club and there were plenty of knowledgeable people to advise me. I also bought a book on breeding cockatiels and started to learn a few things, such as how many days the eggs would incubate before hatching, when the babies would leave the nest, etc.

It was interesting to observe the relationship between Keegan and Julia during the brooding process. I thought it was really sweet that both parents would take turns sitting on the eggs. I was thrilled when the eggs finally hatched and I really felt like a proud grandmother. This was the first time I had ever seen a baby bird and was I surprised! I never thought they were ugly, even though their pink bodies looked awkward with yellow fuzz, huge eyes covered with skin and wobbly feet which they could not maneuver. I was fascinated by the way the hatchlings leaned on each other until they were strong enough to support their heads.

As the babies developed, they just got cuter and cuter. Even though some people say the nest shouldn't be disturbed, I couldn't resist playing with the babies. After their feathers started growing in, I took them out of the nest quite often and they grew up to be quite tame.

Unfortunately, after all the babies had hatched, but before they opened their eyes, Julia tried to kill one of them. I had brought my neighbors in to see my "grandkids" and when I opened the nest box, there was a bloody baby inside and Julia had blood all over her. She had attacked the baby under one wing and, of course, it was 8:00 p.m. on a Sunday night. I was lucky to find an emergency veterinary clinic less than a mile away and I desperately took the baby, hoping it could be saved. The

veterinarian on call had never seen a baby like that and wasn't sure what to do. After consulting a chart in a book for body weight and dosage, she administered an injection to prevent shock and infection. I named this baby "Tristan," meaning sad, and took it home.

The next day I went to my regular veterinarian and bought some hand-feeding formula. I had to learn how to handfeed this baby on the spot or it would die. Fortunately I am a quick learner and I had the enormous amount of time and flexibility needed to handfeed a baby cockatiel only one week old. Tristy did just fine. She grew up strong and healthy, except for the injured wing which never really healed. The feathers did not grow in properly and continued to break and bleed all the time. As a result, I also learned minor first aid for cuts, bleeding and pulling broken feathers. I believe this knowledge is essential if you are going to keep birds, as you never know what accidents will happen.

Tristy turned out to be a great mother herself and raised many beautiful, healthy babies. Julia never hurt another baby and was also a good breeder.

Looking back, this experience has really taught me how strong and determined cockatiels can be. Not knowing very much about birds when I started, I probably broke every rule there is. Everyone has read articles about nutritious diets which birds need to successfully breed. Despite repeated efforts, my cockatiels have never been willing to try many foods other than seeds and, as a result, they were switched to pellets a few years ago. Nevertheless, they have repeatedly produced clutch after clutch of big, healthy babies.

I have read many articles on the best way to set up cockatiels and other birds for breeding, describing minimum cage/flight size, compatible neighbors, etc. However, I have a large "three story apartment cage" divided into six units. This cage houses Bourke's Parakeets, Grey-cheeked Parakeets, lovebirds and cockatiels side by side and stacked on top of each other. My cockatiels and lovebirds have raised all their families this way, although I am certain it is not considered an optimum arrangement.

Experts also write about how many hours of light birds should receive during the breeding season. Since all my birds are in the living room of my

small apartment, and the cage is too large to cover, they stay up late with me until I turn the lights out, usually after midnight. Someday, I hope to have a bird room but until then they will have to remain night owls.

I wish I could provide my birds with an expert-approved, environmentally-controlled environment, but I can't right now. I have two balconies with sliding doors adjacent to the cage and I try to provide the birds with as much fresh air as possible. I have also installed a Vita-light on the ceiling to provide full-spectrum light.

As of this writing, I have 15 assorted parrots and my lovebirds are sitting on their fourth clutch of eggs. My message to all beginning breeders out there is don't be intimidated by the experts and their recommendations for how you *must* set up and feed your birds. Learn as much as you can from the experts — they have valuable advice. However, even if your arrangement is not perfect, you can still successfully breed birds. Just do the best you can with what you have and you will be delighted with the results! ●

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