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Successful Colony Breeding of Cockatiels

by Jo Hall

Cockatiels are not difficult to colony breed if one is familiar with a few rules which must be followed when using this method of breeding.

RULE NO. 1 — and most important when colony breeding — use only birds which have grown up together and are familiar with each other. One cannot place strange pairs in the breeding room together and expect them to live and breed in harmony and contentment. Those who desire to raise cockatiels by the colony method must select or purchase a group of youngsters no older than six months, and preferably younger, and place them together in a large, roomy flight where they will grow up together. As they mature, usually at nine to twelve months, they will choose their mates and when the birds are observed sitting together, preening each other and otherwise showing signs of being a true pair, then these pairs may be caught up and sexed and removed to the breeding room. When the pairs have all been situated in the breeding room, nestboxes may be put up. Once these pairs have been put to work, a strange bird should never be introduced into the breeding room, for this will distract the birds from nesting activities, thus creating problems and resulting poor in breeding season. If a bird is lost through accident or illness, eggs or chicks should be fostered out and the mate removed from the breeding room. If this first rule is followed, problems seldom occur in colony breeding.

RULE NO. 2— Do not overcrowd the birds. Too many pairs in the breeding room will cause a multitude of problems and absolute failure or only minimal success is achieved by the colony method. Ideally, in a flight 4 x 12 x 8 feet high, there should be no more than four pairs of breeders. Shelves, constructed from 1 x 12 inch lumber, are ideal to hold the nestboxes. Since these nestboxes are necessarily rather large and bulky, the shelf provides a solid surface for the box to rest on and the nestboxes are much easier to put up or take down. Extra nestboxes should be supplied, at least two more than the amount needed, to give the birds a choice of homesites. If quarreling over nestboxes should occur, a piece of 1/4" plyboard may

be attached on either side of the nestbox extending out in front about five inches so that the occupants will have privacy and cannot see what is happening over at the neighbors' house. Cockatiels are very curious and at the least disturbance, heads will appear at the nestbox entrance to investigate; therefore, it is most important that breeding pairs are kept in secluded, quiet surroundings.

Nestboxes 10 x 12 x 10 inches high are large enough and wood shavings are recommended for use as nesting material, spread about three inches deep in the bottom of the box. Cedar shavings are preferred for the fresh, clean smell and bugs stay away from boxes containing this material. Sawdust is not suitable as nesting material, for eggs can become buried in it and tiny chicks may be smothered. Natural tree branches from fruit and nut trees, oak, elm, willow, and eucalyptus make excellent perches and may be placed at each end of the flight to allow as much flying room as possible. The varying sizes of tree limbs are restful to the feet of perching birds and keep the feet from becoming sore and tender. Cockatiels delight in chewing on fresh branches and the wood fiber is good for them. Perches must be secured firmly, for a sudden shift may harm breeding pairs or prevent a successful mating.

In conclusion, to maintain good health and vigor and prolong breeding productivity of mated pairs, it is recommended that they be allowed to raise no more than two or three broods per year. Pairs may be allowed one clutch in autumn, rested during the winter months, then allowed one or two more clutches in the spring and rested again during the summer months. When this regimen is followed, the birds continue to be productive breeders for up to ten years. The rearing of a brood of four to six youngsters requires a tremendous amount of exhausting work for the parent birds, even in the most ideal environment where the proper diet is provided for easy feeding of chicks. Those who breed for quality rather than quantity will allow a season for breeder pairs to rest and recuperate from the stress and strain of raising babies, and to regain strength and energy for the next breeding season ■