

# Cockatiels

## The Perfect Parrot for Everyone

by Luke Vanlaningham  
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If you want a small hookbill that is a prolific breeder and popular as a pet, the Cockatiel is for you. Breeding and raising Cockatiels is a great way to "get your feet wet" with raising exotic birds and at the same time make a little money while doing so. The Cockatiel can be considered a "bread and butter" bird. They are always there producing babies, both under favorable and unfavorable conditions.

Cockatiels are found throughout Australia, except for the eastern seaboard. The gray Cockatiel is found in the wild, while many mutations are now available due to artificial selections made by man. Although there are many mutations of Cockatiels, the pied, cinnamon, pearl and lutino are the most common. There is also the cinnamon-pied, pearl-pied and cinnamon-pearl-pied. In addition, white-face mutations have recently exploded in popularity. The white face comes with the same mutations as the normal Cockatiels: pearl white face, pied white face, cinnamon pied white face, etc. Albino Cockatiels are often confused with the lutino. The albino is a mutation of the whiteface and is exclusively white with red eyes. The lutino also has red eyes but has more yellow in its color and has an orange cheek patch. An easy way for the beginner to recognize the difference between a normal Cockatiel and a white face Cockatiel is knowing that the normal Cockatiel has orange cheek patches while the white face has no orange cheek patches.

There are so many theories and practices concerning sexing Cockatiels that it can become confusing. I will concentrate on what works best for me. I attempt to sex Cockatiels that are at least six months old, but the older they are, the easier they are to sex. At six months, the gray, cinnamon and pearl male birds will molt and grow yellow feathers on their heads. The pearl male will also lose the pearl markings and become like a gray Cockatiel. The hens will keep the same coloring as immature birds. The

adult lutino can be sexed by catching the bird and checking under the wings and on the tail. Females will have yellow bars on their feathers, while these are absent in the males. This is fairly accurate, but I have seen a couple of birds that have had the markings of the opposite sex.

The peds can also be sexed by the method above (although it's not 100 percent accurate), but I prefer vent sexing. The only problem with vent sexing is that it can be tricky. Usually, if the bird is a female you can fit your index finger between the pelvic bones, while the male's pelvic bones are closer together. The problem with this, though, is that females that are not ready to lay have pelvic bones that are close together. I solve this by putting all my peds in a large flight with nest boxes when they are about a year old. The females usually start laying quickly, thus opening their pelvic bones. Remember, six months is the minimum age to sex Cockatiels; the older the Cockatiel, the easier it is to sex.

A sure-fire way of sexing Cockatiels is to have them surgically sexed or chromosome sexed. However, chromosome sexing is expensive if dealing with a large number of birds. It can be advantageous, though, to surgically sex young birds that are kept back for breeding stock, in order to keep only the birds wanted and to sell

the excess birds.

I normally set Cockatiels up to breed when they are at least a year old. Cockatiels can either be bred as individual pairs in single cages or colony bred in flights. I incorporate both of these methods and find advantages and disadvantages to both. I set the Cockatiels up in the fall and let them breed until the beginning of summer. I put the nest boxes in around the first of September and pull the boxes around late May. Our summers here in central California can be brutal so breeding in the summer months is avoided. Cockatiels will usually breed year-round if given the chance, so a breeding system based on your climate would be advised. As mentioned above, I give the birds three months off, during which I pull the nest boxes out of the cages and flights.

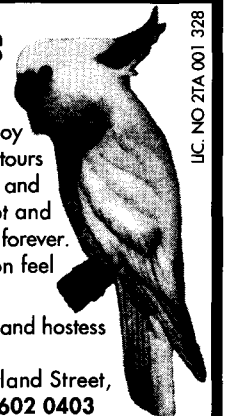
I usually let new pairs of Cockatiels pick their own mates. I do this by placing an equal number of males and females in a flight with several nest boxes. Then it is up to my observational skills and quickness to catch the bonded pairs! Usually the pair can be found in the box together, especially at dusk and dawn. If I am breeding for a certain mutation it is sometimes unavoidable to have to pair birds up "artificially." This is done by putting the pair in an individual cage with no nest box for at least a few weeks in order for the pair to get acquainted. A nest box can then be installed.

In colony breeding, four pairs of Cockatiels are placed in a flight that measures 4' x 8' x 10'. Six nest boxes are hung toward the back of the flight in different locations. The boxes are 12" square and 18" deep and are

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# Basics in Canary Care

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placed as high in the flight as possible. The 18 inches is deeper than most Cockatiel boxes, but I have found that the depth keeps fledglings in the box a little longer. Pine shavings are used for the nesting material. Feed and water dishes are located in the front of the walk-in flight for easy access. Perches are placed at either end of the flight. Plenty of perch space is invaluable for the welfare of the Cockatiels. Half inch by half inch chicken wire is placed on the top of the flight due to the Cockatiels' frequent skittishness. The chicken wire has a lot of flexibility when flown into, thus reducing the risk of broken necks. Half inch by one inch, sixteen gauge wire is used on the rest of the flight.

The individual cages measure 18" wide, 2' deep and 4' tall. These cages are hung on a wall with the bottom of the cage resting about four feet off the ground. Three plastic feed pans are inserted at the bottom of the cage. The nest box is placed halfway into the cage with the inspection hole on the outside, making for easy checking of the nest. A perch is placed horizontally to the front of the box. Make sure the perch is not placed over the feed pans allowing feed to become contaminated with feces.

The average clutch for Cockatiels is four eggs. I have noticed that pairs in individual cages will lay one or two more eggs, on the average, than birds set up in colony breeding flights. Eggs require 18 days to hatch. It is usual for pairs to double or triple clutch in a season.

The Cockatiels are fed a very basic diet. Parakeet seed is mixed 50/50 with a "homemade" crumble — these crumbles resemble laying crumbles for chickens, but contain no animal by-products. Three-way grain (oats, barley, corn and molasses) is also available to all pairs. The three way grain is quickly consumed by parents raising babies.

Cockatiels are fun and exciting birds to raise. Getting started in raising them is the hardest part. Once you have a few established breeding pairs, it's great fun! Unfortunately, you will always have a discouraging moment with the birds — deaths, infertile eggs, incompatibility, etc. — but peering into the box and seeing four little fuzzy babies crying for mother makes it all worthwhile! ●

Singing canaries! For years I dreamed of having these beautiful birds enrich my life.

Nearly ten years ago I purchased my first canary — a magnificent yellow Border. He came home in a "gilded" cage. Forewarned that he may take a week to adjust to his new environment, I did not expect him to sing for at least this adjustment period.

The next morning I awoke to the most glorious singing I had ever heard. He was serenading me with his best repertoire. He sang every day, including an evening song before he bedded down at night until his life quietly ended. He sired many beautiful babies and exhibited only joy and happiness throughout our nine years together.

Canaries are hearty birds, despite their rather delicate appearance. The following suggestions can provide you with basic steps for the care of your canaries.

## Cages

Canaries should be provided with as large a cage as possible to provide ample flying space. Place the perches at opposite ends of the cage on two different levels with different sized diameters. Be sure you stagger the perches so that they are not directly underneath another perch. This will minimize dirty perches. Canaries love swings; add one in the cage for extra fun. Place all seed cups and water dishes away from perches to avoid contamination from droppings.

## Cage Placement

Canary cages should not be placed in direct sunlight. Even though canaries love to sunbathe, too much heat can pose problems. Never hang your canary cage from the ceiling; heat rises and this could be disastrous for your birds. Additionally, keep your cages away from drafts.

## Feeding

Canaries are seed eaters. A good mix of canary and rape seed will provide a balanced seed diet. Include well-rinsed, soaked seed or, if you

can, allow the seed to sprout; this is even better and will be a welcomed treat. Green vegetables such as broccoli, spinach, dandelion leaves or watercress are excellent roughage sources for your birds. It is necessary to provide fresh food daily and always check the seed cups. Canaries eat a tremendous amount of seed and you must not let the dishes become empty.

Give cuttlebone and additional oyster shell to your canaries. This provides calcium which is especially important during the breeding and molting seasons.

Water can be provided in a glass tube waterer. Be sure to clean and change the tube waterer daily. If you use a large water dish, the canaries will bathe in it; thereby causing the water to foul.

## The Molt

Each summer canaries molt their feathers. This is a rather stressful time for the birds. If necessary, you can supplement their diet with a commercial blend of stress diet food.

Don't be surprised if you see a lot of feathers dropping at this time. This is normal. In a young bird's first molt you may notice that the incoming mature feathers are slightly different in color. This is because the bird has simply shed his baby feathers and replaced them with adult color.

Provide daily baths during this time as this will help the preening and conditioning process of the new feathering. Male canaries often stop singing during the molting season, however, I have had males sing straight on through.

If you notice at any other time of year an abnormal loss of feathers, your birds could have French Molt. Contact an avian veterinarian for advice if this should happen.

## Bathing

The bath, without a doubt, is the favorite time for a canary and his owner! Canaries prefer to bathe in the morning. Fill a shallow dish with tepid water and place it on the floor of the cage. If you can, provide some sunlight for preening and drying-off time. Your canary will be a very happy bird.

These simple guidelines for canary care may sound very basic but if you utilize them your birds will reward you with beautiful songs and, perhaps, if you should decide to get into breeding your birds, many colorful offspring. ●