

Cockatiel Basics

by Marcia Welch, 2002

Species Name: *Nymphicus hollandicus*. Recent DNA research confirms that cockatiels are indeed the smallest cockatoos, most closely related to the black cockatoos (red-tailed, yellow-tailed, white-tailed, and glossy) and the gang-gang.

Physical Characteristics: 12-14 inches long, average weight between 90 and 110 grams. Show birds can be as much as 180 grams.

General Characteristics: Males are usually more vocal and outgoing, and are more likely to talk and whistle than females. They can also be nippier than the girls, especially during breeding season. Females tend to be quieter and cuddlier. Both sexes are more vocal when in breeding mode. Cockatiels are naturally dusty birds because of the powder down they produce, and this is perhaps the most negative aspect of owning this species, especially for those with allergies. One or two birds that are bathed often and whose cages are kept very clean are not much of a problem, but of course the amount of dust will increase with each additional bird. Air cleaners/filters will help also. And, as is the case with any bird, cockatiels are messy critters! A good vacuum cleaner is essential in any household with birds!

Origin: Most of the Australian continent, except for coastal regions. Very nomadic, usually in large flocks, following food and water sources. Aboriginal names include "Quarrion" and "Weero".

Life Span: 15-40 years, depending on the care provided and genetic predisposition to health problems. The oldest recorded age for a cockatiel is 38 years!

Health Concerns: Bacterial and yeast infections, fatty liver disease, inbred kidney disease, vitamin A deficiency, chronic egg laying in females.

Diet: Low-fat (3-8%) diet formulated for cockatiels; fresh vegetables, especially dark green and red/orange varieties; a little high quality seed mix. Cooked mixes with brown rice are usually accepted better than those with beans or pasta. Do NOT feed grit. Cockatiels, as well as all other hookbills, do not require it, and it can be very detrimental rather than helpful.

Caging: As large as possible, with bar spacing no greater than 5/8-inch. Perches should be of varying sizes and textures to avoid pressure sores on the feet. This is called bumblefoot, and can be very serious. *Thoroughly washed and rinsed*, freshly cut tree branches are ideal, but do NOT use cherry wood, black walnut, and pine/fir species. The cage should be spot-cleaned daily, and thoroughly cleaned at least once a week.

Toys: Soft wood (untreated, milled pine) that is easy to chew, vegetable tanned leather, natural sisal or cotton rope, bells (NOT the jingle bell type, as these can trap toes or beaks), plastic beads, paper, and cotton fabric. All of these can be popular choices for cockatiels, and each bird will have their favorites. Offer toys of the appropriate size, and try various textures to see what appeals to your bird.

Interesting Behaviors: Hopping, hammering with the beak, and walking with the wings outstretched are common courtship behaviors of males. Hanging upside down with the wings spread (i.e., Bat Bird!) is most often done by females, but males sometimes do this, too. It's a sign of territoriality or dominance. Beak grinding indicates contented relaxation, and is most often heard just before falling asleep. Night frights, or thrashing episodes, are quite common with cockatiels. It's usually helpful to provide a night light, so your bird is never in complete darkness, and depending on the individual situation, other preventive measures may apply. See the G.L.A.S. Basic Bird Care Booklet for more suggestions, as well as the books listed below.

Grooming: Trim toenails and wings as needed. Before you attempt this yourself, have an experienced bird groomer or avian vet show you the proper technique. A normal beak should ABSOLUTELY NEVER be trimmed. If the bird has a beak deformity it should only be corrected by an avian vet with experience in beak reshaping, as the beak has major blood and nerve supply, and if improperly done is not only extremely painful, but can cause permanent psychological trauma. Bathing should be done at least twice a week, and more often if possible, using plain water only. Cockatiels produce a powder down to coat their feathers, and frequent spray misting helps to keep the dust under control. Be sure to use a clean spray bottle that has never had anything but water in it, and set it to fine mist.

Common Hazards: Fumes emitted from overheated nonstick (Teflon) coating on cookware, appliances, and dozens of other household items will kill your bird in minutes. Tobacco smoke is extremely harmful, as are fumes from cleaning products, nail polish, glue, perfume, hair spray, kerosene heaters, self-cleaning ovens, paint, etc. If you can detect an odor, don't use that product around your bird! Other pets can attack and kill your bird in seconds, even if they are only "playing", and the same holds true for unsupervised children. Birds wandering on the floor or on furniture can be easily stepped or sat upon. Ingested toxins from plants, foods, and endless other sources can be deadly. In short, birds can be harmed in any number of ways that are not always obvious, and you will need to be constantly aware of where they are and what they're doing. Use common sense, and if in doubt about whether an item or situation is safe, better to err on the side of caution!

Resources: Many of the cockatiel books available were published years ago and contain very outdated, and sometimes downright bad, information. Two of the best books on the market today are both authored by Diane Grindol, and are excellent choices for current information. They are: "The Complete Book of Cockatiels" and "Cockatiels for Dummies". Also, check the websites for the National Cockatiel Society (www.cockatiels.org) and the American Cockatiel Society (www.acstiels.com) for some good articles and membership forms. A subscription to Bird Talk Magazine (www.birdtalk.com) is also a good idea. Since this sheet barely scratches the surface of what you will need to know to provide committed, responsible care for your cockatiel companion's lifetime, please take advantage of the resources listed here. *Never stop learning!*