

Parakeets & Cockatiels

Budgies (*Budgerigar Parakeets*) are native to Australia, where they still exist in large flocks. They are a “true parrot”, members of the *Psittacidae* family. Cockatiels are native to Australia, part of the *Cacatulidae* family (which includes cockatoos).

Birds as Pets

Birds are complex creatures who require a great deal of time, attention and care. However, they are truly fascinating animals and can be delightful companions, each with their own unique personality. Birds are flock animals by nature and need the company of others to feel secure and happy. If they do not have other birds to live with, that responsibility falls on you!

Pet birds are still very close to their wild ancestors—the behaviors that make them fun and entertaining companions also make them noisy, messy and destructive. Proper management, emotional and physical enrichment, and positive reinforcement training are critical for a healthy and happy relationship with your bird.

Physical Characteristics

In nature, budgies are all yellow and green with black and white markings. Adult males have a bluish “cere” (the area around their nostrils above the beak) while adult females have a beige or brown cere.

In captivity there are many color and pattern variations that can make sexing your bird more difficult as the color of the cere is also affected. Healthy budgies can live 15 years or more, quite a long term commitment!

A “normal” male cockatiel is mostly gray with a bright yellow head and bright orange “cheeks.” A female cockatiel is mostly grey with less-brilliant orange “cheeks” and very little yellow on the head. However, cockatiels have been bred into many other color variations. Males tend to sing and vocalize more than females. Well-cared for cockatiels can live 25 years or longer.



Housing

When it comes to cages, bigger is always better. Width is more important than height, as budgies tend to move horizontally and generally spend most of their time only in the top third of their cage. Round cages are not appropriate—birds are prey animals and when scared or nervous they need a corner to retreat to.

- Minimum cage size for two budgies is 18”x18”x24”. A minimum-size cage for cockatiels is 20”x20”x26”.
- The bars of the cages should be 1/2” to 5/8”. Wider spacing can be dangerous as wings/heads/bodies may become trapped.
- Cages should be “powder-coated” metal or stainless steel so that the birds cannot chew through the bars to toxic metal beneath the surface.
- Locate the cage near family activities—a family room in front of a window that doesn’t get exceedingly hot or cold is an excellent choice. Do not place the cage near the kitchen; cookware fumes can be deadly.
- Use paper towels or newsprint to line the cage. Do not use corn cob or other “bird litter” as it can encourage dangerous bacterial growth.

Perches and Toys

Birds spend day and night on their feet, so what they stand on is

very important. Use a variety of perches with different diameters such as natural Manzanita branches, rope and ladders. Your budgie should be able to close their feet about halfway around the perch, so in most cases a 1/2” diameter (give or take) is appropriate.

Good toys are usually chewable—soft enough for your particular bird to enjoy ripping it apart—or involve foraging for small treats. Toys should be rotated frequently to keep them interesting, and those that hang completely untouched should be removed.

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Diet

In the wild both types of birds are seen eating greens, fruits and seeds when they are in season. Chopping vegetables and fruits is time-consuming, so bird food manufacturers have produced pelleted diets that are formulated to be nutritionally complete. For convenience, we recommend pellets as the best way to give your pet bird a balanced diet, supplemented by a sampling of organic fresh fruits and veggies and a limited amount of seed. See the appendix for a website that lists recommended pellets.

If your adopted avian friend has not eaten pellets before, it will be important to transition them carefully. Birds generally need time to adapt to anything new in their environment; pay close attention to whether your bird is eating properly during this transition, or s/he could starve. One website addressing eating problems and a safe transition to pellets is mickaboo.org/reading-room/readingroom.html.

Seeds are recommended only in very small amounts as a treat. Many commercially available seed mixes are not the fresh, nutritious seeds birds eat in the wild off of living plants. Be sure to buy only a high-quality, dated bag from a store that has frequent product turnover.

Try to have at least one feeding dish per bird to reduce competition. One water dish is sufficient, but must be kept very clean with once or twice-daily washing. Do not put any vitamin or mineral supplements into the water unless directed to do so by an avian veterinarian. They are not necessary and can encourage bacterial growth.

Fresh organic greens and veggies should be washed well and either hung as whole leaves or chopped. Romaine lettuce is the least nutritious but is well-liked and useful for transitioning your birds to eating greens. Kales, chard, beet greens, broccoli and carrots are good choices, as well as cooked squash and sweet potato. Fruit is a welcome treat, but should be used in moderation due to the high moisture and sugar content.

Sprouted seeds such as organic wheat berries or quinoa are excellent sources of vitamins but must be very fresh to avoid unwanted bacteria. Cooked grains such as barley, brown rice, quinoa and oats can be offered in moderation.

NEVER feed chocolate, avocado, onion, garlic, alcoholic beverages of any kind, salty snacks or other junk food. All of these can be fatal to a pet bird.

Unlike pigeons and doves, Budgies do NOT need grit. Instead, provide a parrot mineral block (preferable to a "cuttle bone") to supply calcium and help keep the beak trimmed.

General Care

Like other pets, birds need routine cleaning, grooming and vet care, and thrive on a good routine and predictable schedule.

Birds are fastidiously clean animals who spend hours preening themselves. However, they can create a great deal of mess around them as they scatter unwanted food, seed hulls and feathers all over the ground. Clean the cage paper and remove feces from perches and toys daily. Clean water dishes at least once a day (or more if soiled) and wash the entire cage monthly, or more frequently if needed.

Toenails should be trimmed if they get too sharp. Long nails can catch in perches and toys, causing injury. Wing clipping is also important—full flighted birds can injure themselves flying into unseen glass and mirrors, or escape out open doors and windows. Wings should generally be clipped every six to eight weeks—consult an avian vet to learn how to do this safely.

Birds produce a lot of dander from their feathers. They normally bathe in the wild, and need to be provided a way to do so in your home. You can put a shallow dish of water in the cage, or use a gentle spray from a bottle. Some birds can even learn to join you in the shower! Be sure to introduce bathing with positive reinforcement techniques. (See appendix for resources.)

Never grab or hold a bird around its chest. Any pressure on its chest restricts breathing and can quickly damage or kill the bird. Never strike, scream at or punish a bird—this is not only ineffective, but can be frightening, injurious and even fatal. The best training methods are positive reinforcement and prevention.

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Safety

Similar to preparing for a child or a new puppy, you must take preventative measures to ensure your home is safe for your new bird. Some of these precautions include:

- No Teflon pans—at high heats they exude a dangerous gas which can kill birds in minutes.
- Keep toilet lids down. Open water containers pose a drowning risk.
- Don't smoke in the house, and wash hands and change clothes before handling your bird.
- Do not use ceiling fans if your bird is out of the cage.
- Screen all windows and doors and remove toxic plants from your home (see appendix for lists).
- Keep birds in the cage when other animals are free and any time the bird is unsupervised.
- Watch carefully if your bird is on the floor; supervise any child/bird interactions closely.
- When installing new flooring (and some furniture) keep your birds in another room (or preferably another house) for several weeks while the materials “out-gas”—the fumes can be lethal to your birds.

Handling and Bonding

A bird needs time to adjust to its new environment—this can take days or weeks. Trying to handle your bird when it does not want to be handled (forcing it to “step up!” for example) will damage your relationship and lead to an unhappy bird. Patience is critical to achieving a rewarding friendship.

To help your new bird to want to get to know you, try whispering things to him—birds have very sensitive hearing, and they will lean toward you to listen carefully. You can also whistle or sing to them, or read out loud while sitting close to the cage. Do not stare directly on at your bird—this mimics predatory behavior. Instead, turn your head, bowed slightly, and look at them sideways. You will appear less threatening and be more appealing to your bird. Also try eating a snack or meal next to the cage. Your bird may start eating with you (food sharing is a bonding behavior).

Learn training and handling skills that involve positive reinforcement. An excellent resource for these techniques is Barbara Heidenreich, the publisher of *Good Bird!* magazine (GoodBirdInc.com).

Introducing Birds

Never immediately throw birds together! A new bird may appear fine when you bring it home, but could be harboring parasites or disease. Quarantine new birds in a different room for a minimum of four weeks. Be sure to wash your hands between handling your new bird and your existing bird or their supplies.

After quarantine, introduce your birds slowly. Set the cages on opposite sides of the same room and over the course of several days move them closer, watching behavior closely. After a week or two, try introducing the birds in a neutral environment such as on a table in another room, away from the cages where they may be territorial. Include toys and treats as activities to distract them. If things go well during several visits like this, try them on the same play stand or cage top. Only when it is clear they will get along should they be housed together.

Social Interaction and Playtime

Spending time with your bird is essential to a satisfying relationship for both of you. Birds, being very social creatures, can quickly get lonely and unhappy without enriching companionship. Birds that are lonely or bored develop serious problems, both behavioral and physical. You must keep both their bodies and their minds frequently exercised! Teaching your bird tricks is a great way to enhance your communication and give the birds an activity that is challenging and interesting.

Signs of Illness and Veterinarians

It's important for you to find a qualified avian veterinarian as soon as possible to get your new bird a wellness check. Your vet needs a baseline of your bird's health for comparison should trouble arise. It is also critical for you to have someone knowledgeable to call in the event of an emergency or sudden illness.

Your personal observations of your bird's normal behavior are critical to your recognition of something going wrong. If your bird is suddenly drinking more water than usual, or if your bird is abnormally fluffed up and there are no obvious causes (such as a cold room), the need to get your bird to the vet is urgent.

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Symptoms of illness can include but are not limited to:

- Sitting or lying on the bottom of the cage
- Increased respiratory rate
- Tail bobbing while at rest; ruffled feathers
- Noisy breathing, coughing and/or sneezing
- Nasal or eye discharge; swelling around the eyes
- Change in tone or voice
- Lethargy, weakness
- Loss of appetite, anorexia, or noticeable increased water intake
- Loose, watery and/or discolored stools
- Any major change in behavior such as fearfulness, aggression, or screaming

A partial list of qualified avian veterinarians in the San Francisco Bay Area can be found at mickaboo.org/reading-room/readingroom.html. Note that emergency veterinary centers rarely have an avian-experienced vet on staff, and some will not even see birds. Call ahead if you need to take your bird in for an emergency when your regular vet is not available.

Want to learn more?

A good video of a budgie bird cage setup:
youtube.com/watch?v=tMnIPY1qOUA

This website has many recommendations for everything from solving behavioral issues to toy and food suppliers to safe vs. unsafe house plants:
mickaboo.org/reading-room/readingroom.html

This website also lists qualified avian veterinarians in the greater SF Bay Area; go to "Health: Veterinary Reference." mickaboo.org/reading-room/readingroom.html

DVDs and books on body language, positive reinforcement and training: goodbirdinc.com

Training information and a wide variety of links: feathere-dangels.wordpress.com

Recommended bird books:

- *Companion Parrot Handbook* by Sally Blanchard
- *Budgerigars (Complete Pet Owner's Manual)* by H. Niemann
- *Parakeets for Dummies* by Nikki Moustaki
- *The Parakeet Handbook* by Annette Wolter
- *Cockatiels for Dummies* by Diane Grindol
- *The Complete Book of Cockatiels* by Diane Grindol
- *The Parrot Problem Solver* by Barbara Heidenreich
- *Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot* by Mattie Sue Athan



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