

# Cockatiel

## Care Guide for New Owners

Parrot

Cockatiel

Crested Parrot

Native to Australia

### Quick Facts at a Glance

<b>Species</b>	Nymphicus hollandicus
<b>Lifespan</b>	15 to 25 years with proper care
<b>Adult Size</b>	12 to 13 inches nose to tail; 3 to 4 oz
<b>Activity Cycle</b>	Diurnal; active during the day
<b>Temperament</b>	Affectionate, social, and expressive; bonds strongly with people
<b>Cage Minimum</b>	20x20x24 inches (L x W x H); 1/4 to 1/2 inch bar spacing
<b>Social Needs</b>	Strongly recommend keeping in pairs; see social section
<b>Diet</b>	50% high-quality pellets, 50% fresh chop; seed-only diets cause serious harm
<b>Noise Level</b>	Moderate; males especially whistle, sing, and chatter throughout the day
<b>Talking/Mimicry</b>	Many cockatiels whistle tunes and some learn words; individual results vary
<b>Night Frights</b>	Prone to night terrors; requires awareness and management
<b>Legal Status</b>	Legal in Wisconsin; verify local ordinances

### Cockatiels Are Parrots

Cockatiels belong to the order Psittaciformes, making them true parrots. They are the only member of the genus Nymphicus and are actually classified within the cockatoo family (Cacatuidae), making them the smallest member of that family. What this means practically is that they share the cognitive

complexity, emotional depth, social needs, and behavioral richness of all parrots. They are not low-effort animals despite their small size.

Cockatiels are native to Australia and are one of the most widely kept parrots in the world. The captive population today is many generations removed from wild birds, but their behavioral needs remain deeply rooted in their wild ancestry as nomadic flock birds.

### **All Parrots Can Be Noisy**

Cockatiels are not the loudest parrots, but males especially whistle, call, and sing throughout the day. This is natural and healthy behavior. Contact calls when a bird cannot see its flock member (you) are common and can be persistent. If noise is a significant concern for your living situation, a parrot may not be the right fit.

## **Social Needs**

Cockatiels are flock animals who live in large groups in the wild. Boggy's Buddies strongly recommends keeping cockatiels in pairs. A bonded pair of cockatiels is visibly happier, more active, and less prone to stress-related behaviors like feather destruction than a single bird. Two cockatiels are only marginally more work than one.

### **Single Cockatiel Ownership**

A single cockatiel requires extensive daily interaction from its owner to compensate for the absence of a flock companion. This means multiple hours of supervised out-of-cage time, consistent handling, and genuine engagement. A cockatiel that sits alone in its cage for most of the day is not living a fulfilling life.

## Household Dangers for Birds

Birds have an extraordinarily efficient respiratory system with continuous one-way airflow through air sacs connected to the lungs. This makes them far more sensitive to airborne toxins than mammals. Many everyday household items that humans barely register are genuinely life-threatening to a bird. Every person who brings a bird into their home must understand these dangers before that bird arrives.

### Non-Stick Cookware and PTFE (Teflon)

#### The Number One Household Killer of Pet Birds

Cookware, bakeware, and appliances coated with polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE), sold under brand names including Teflon, release invisible, odorless toxic fumes when overheated. These fumes cause acute respiratory failure in birds within minutes and are almost always fatal. A bird can be dead in under 15 minutes with no warning whatsoever. Non-stick cookware must not be used in any home with a bird. This includes non-stick pots, pans, waffle irons, air fryers, some drip pans and oven liners, and some ironing board covers. Check every appliance and piece of cookware before bringing a bird home and replace anything with a PTFE coating.

### Other Airborne Toxins

- Candles, incense, and wax melts: Scented candles, incense, wax warmers, and essential oil diffusers release volatile compounds that cause respiratory irritation and damage in birds. Never use these in a room where a bird spends time.
- Aerosol sprays: Hairspray, air fresheners, spray cleaners, perfume, and spray paint all pose serious respiratory risks. Ventilate thoroughly and keep birds away from any room where aerosols are used.
- Scented plug-in air fresheners: These release compounds continuously and should not be used anywhere near a bird.
- Smoke of any kind: Cigarette, cigar, wood smoke, vaping aerosol, and marijuana smoke are all harmful to bird respiratory tracts. Never smoke near or in the same room as a bird.
- Overheated cooking oils and burning food: Even without PTFE, combustion products from burned food can irritate birds. Ensure good kitchen ventilation when cooking.
- Fresh paint, varnish, adhesives, and treated wood: Off-gassing from new materials can be harmful. Allow full curing and thorough ventilation before the bird returns to any treated area.
- Household cleaning products: Bleach, ammonia-based cleaners, and many commercial sprays are toxic to birds. Use bird-safe alternatives for anything near the cage and rinse all surfaces thoroughly.

### Physical Dangers

- Ceiling fans: Always turn off ceiling fans before allowing a bird out of its cage. A bird in flight and a moving ceiling fan is a fatal combination.

- Exposed electrical cords: Birds chew. A bird that bites through a live wire can be electrocuted. Cover or hide all cords in any space where your bird has free flight time.
- Open water: Toilet bowls, full sinks, buckets, and aquariums can trap and drown a bird. Keep these covered or doors closed during free flight.
- Cats and dogs: Even a playful swipe from a cat can deliver fatal Pasteurella bacteria into a bird's bloodstream through a scratch. Never allow unsupervised contact between a bird and any cat or dog.
- Windows and mirrors: Birds cannot distinguish glass from open space. Mark large windows or cover them during free flight to prevent collision injuries.
- Hot surfaces: Birds can land on hot stove burners during free flight. Never allow birds in the kitchen while cooking.
- Small gaps and tight spaces: Birds explore and can get stuck behind appliances or inside small openings where they can injure themselves or cannot be reached.

## Housing and Cage Setup

The minimum cage size for a cockatiel is 20 inches wide by 20 inches deep by 24 inches tall, with bar spacing of 1/4 to 1/2 inch. This is a minimum. A larger flight cage that allows actual movement between perches is significantly better for physical and psychological health. Horizontal bars are preferred as they allow climbing. Avoid round cages, which offer no corners for security and make perch placement difficult.

### Night Frights

Cockatiels are uniquely prone to night terrors, where a sudden sound or shadow causes them to thrash and flap in the dark, sometimes injuring themselves on cage bars. Manage this by covering the cage at night with a breathable cover, leaving a dim night light on in the room, or placing the cage away from windows where outside lights and movement can startle the bird. A cockatiel found on the cage floor in the morning has likely had a night fright.

## Perches: Variety Is Essential

Perch quality and variety have a direct impact on foot health. A bird stands on its perches every moment it is in the cage. Providing only one type or diameter of perch causes constant pressure on the same points of the foot, which leads to bumblefoot, a painful and difficult-to-treat bacterial infection of the foot pads.

- Natural wood branches: The best option. Irregular shapes and diameters constantly shift foot position and exercise different muscles. Use untreated wood from bird-safe species such as apple, willow, manzanita, and dragonwood.
- Rope perches: Soft, comfortable, and good for variety. Inspect regularly for fraying, as loose fibers can wrap around toes and cause tourniquet injuries. Replace when significant fraying appears.
- Calcium or mineral perches: Provide texture and help keep the beak slightly worn. Fine as one option among several.
- Nail file or pedicure perches: Acceptable as one perch among multiple options to help maintain nail length. Should never be the only or primary perch, as prolonged contact with an abrasive surface damages foot pads.
- Dowel perches: Limit to no more than one per cage. Uniform smooth dowels provide no variation in diameter or texture and promote foot problems when used exclusively.

### **Place Perches Thoughtfully**

Position perches at different heights throughout the cage. The highest perch is where most birds prefer to sleep, so make it comfortable and secure. Never position perches directly over food or water dishes where droppings contaminate them. Ensure all perches are stable and do not wobble.

## **Toys and Enrichment**

Cockatiels need mental stimulation. Provide at least three to five toys and rotate them regularly. Cockatiels enjoy shreddable toys, foot toys, swings, bells, and foraging puzzles. Many cockatiels are attracted to mirrors, though excessive mirror fixation in single birds can sometimes reinforce hormonal behavior. Rotate what is in the cage and observe what your individual bird engages with most.

## **Diet and Nutrition**

Diet is one of the areas where parrot care most commonly falls short of what these birds actually need. An all-seed diet is the single most common nutritional mistake made by parrot owners across all species.

### **Why Seed-Only Diets Are Harmful**

Seeds are high in fat and carbohydrates and deficient in many essential vitamins and minerals, particularly Vitamin A and calcium. A parrot eating only seeds is essentially eating nutritionally incomplete food at every single meal. Vitamin A deficiency causes respiratory problems, immune suppression, and organ damage over time. The high fat content leads to obesity and fatty liver disease, both of which are extremely common in seed-fed parrots and both of which shorten lifespan significantly. Seeds are fine as an occasional treat or a component of a varied diet, but they should never be the foundation.

### **Recommended Diet**

Boggy's Buddies recommends a diet of approximately 50 percent high-quality pellets and 50 percent fresh chop. Harrison's Bird Foods is our top pellet recommendation, followed by TOPS Parrot Food, and Goldenfeast as a third option. We do not recommend ZuPreem, which uses artificial colors and is not nutritionally balanced to the standard of the above options. Pellets should be sized for small parrots.

### Safe Fresh Foods

- Dark leafy greens: kale, collard greens, dandelion greens
- Bell peppers (excellent Vitamin A source)
- Broccoli, carrots, peas, corn
- Fresh herbs: basil, cilantro, parsley
- Small amounts of apple, blueberry, or mango (no fruit seeds)

### Never Feed These

- Avocado (toxic; causes heart failure in birds)
- Onions and garlic (toxic)
- Chocolate (toxic)
- Fruit seeds and pits
- Alcohol of any kind
- High-sodium or processed human food
- Mushrooms

### Fresh Water

Fresh water must be available at all times. Change it daily and clean the dish or bottle thoroughly every few days. Many parrots enjoy a shallow bath dish or misting, which supports feather condition and provides enrichment.

### Never Pet a Parrot Below the Neck

Petting a parrot on its back, wings, belly, or vent area mimics the behavior of a mate and triggers hormonal responses. This applies to all parrot species. Chronic hormonal stimulation through full-body petting leads to behavioral problems, aggression, and in females, chronic egg-laying with serious associated health risks. Pet only on the head, cheeks, and around the beak. Never pet under the wings, along the back, or near the tail.

### No Nesting Items in the Cage

Do not place nest boxes, cuddle tents, snuggle sacks, or any enclosed fabric items in your bird's cage. When a bird is surrounded on all sides in a tight, cozy space, it registers this as a nest. This triggers powerful hormonal responses in both males and females: egg-laying behavior in females (which can lead to egg binding, a life-threatening emergency) and territorial aggression and frustration in both sexes. A hormonally stimulated parrot is an unhappy, difficult parrot. Comfortable perches at height are all a bird needs for sleeping and resting.

### Wing Clipping: Our Position

Boggy's Buddies does not recommend wing clipping as a routine practice. Flight is a fundamental natural behavior, and fully flighted birds are physically healthier, more confident, and more behaviorally balanced. Flight provides exercise that clipped birds cannot replicate, and birds who learn to fly develop better coordination and emotional resilience.

We recognize that clipping is not the wrong choice in every situation, and we support it in specific circumstances.

### **Situations Where We Support Clipping**

- An adult bird who has been clipped for most of its life and is unlikely to learn to fly safely. For these birds, being suddenly fully flighted without the skills to manage it poses a real injury risk from crashes and falls.
- A hormonal bird who is dive-bombing other birds, animals, or people. Clipping temporarily limits the ability to initiate attacks and can be a safety management tool during a hormonal period.
- Transport, veterinary visits, or other situations where uncontrolled flight poses an escape or injury risk.

#### **If You Clip, Do It Correctly**

Wing clipping should only be done by an avian vet or experienced avian professional. Incorrectly clipped birds cut blood feathers and can fall and injure themselves if left without any ability to glide. A correctly clipped bird should be able to glide slowly to the ground, not drop straight down.

### **Harness Training and Outdoor Time**

Supervised outdoor time in a harness offers real benefits: natural sunlight provides Vitamin D3 that indoor lighting cannot fully replicate, and new sights, sounds, and smells provide enrichment that indoor life simply cannot match.

For most birds, the Aviator harness is our first recommendation. It is well-designed, adjustable, and available in sizes ranging from very small to large parrot. The right harness is ultimately the one that fits and that your individual bird will accept. Some birds adapt to other designs more readily.

Harness training is a long process. We want to be completely clear about this. For most birds, the process from first introduction to comfortable wear takes weeks to months of slow, patient, positive work. Forcing a harness onto a bird who is not ready causes fear and trauma that makes future training exponentially harder. The process begins with simply letting the bird see the harness, then feel it nearby, then brief contact, then seconds of wear, and so on. Every bird moves at its own pace.

#### **Never Leave a Harnessed Bird Unsupervised Outside**

A harnessed bird outside is still a bird that can be attacked by a hawk, a cat, or a dog. Always supervise directly and never tie the leash to an object and walk away.

### **Grooming: Nails, Beak, and Wings**

Regular monitoring of nail length, beak condition, and wing feathers is part of routine bird ownership. With appropriate perch variety and foraging opportunities, beak and nail maintenance is often reduced but never eliminated.

### **Nail Trims**

Overgrown nails curl under the foot and cause pain and difficulty perching. Check nail length regularly. Trims can be performed by an avian vet, an experienced groomer, or a confident owner who has been shown correct technique. Always have styptic powder on hand in case a nail is cut too short and bleeds. Never attempt nail trims on an uncooperative bird alone.

### **Beak Maintenance**

A healthy beak wears naturally through chewing, foraging, and wiping on perches and mineral blocks. An overgrown, misshapen, or laminating beak requires veterinary assessment. Do not attempt beak trims at home. Beak trims require specialized tools and expertise and a mistake can cause serious injury.

### **Wing Trims**

See the wing clipping section above. Any clipping should be done by an avian vet or experienced avian professional only.

## **Common Health Issues**

### **Psittacosis (Chlamydiosis)**

A bacterial disease transmissible to humans. Signs include respiratory distress, green or yellow droppings, lethargy, and loss of appetite. Requires veterinary diagnosis and antibiotic treatment. Any bird from an unknown background should be tested.

### **Fatty Liver Disease**

Caused by seed-heavy diets. Signs include lethargy, fluffed feathers, changes in droppings, and weight gain. Dietary correction and veterinary treatment can improve outcomes if caught early.

### **Respiratory Infections**

Signs include tail-bobbing, clicking or wheezing sounds, open-mouth breathing, and nasal discharge. Always a veterinary emergency in a small bird.

### **Egg Binding**

A life-threatening emergency in females. Signs include straining, sitting on the cage floor, and difficulty breathing. Requires immediate veterinary care. Avoid nesting triggers and ensure adequate calcium to reduce risk.

### **Night Frights**

Thrashing and flapping in the cage at night can cause serious injuries. Manage with appropriate lighting and cage placement as described above.

**Feather Destructive Behavior**

Chewing or plucking feathers is a behavioral signal of stress, boredom, illness, or nutritional deficiency. Always warrants a vet visit to rule out medical causes before addressing behavioral factors.

**PTFE Toxicosis**

Exposure to non-stick fumes causes rapid respiratory failure. Prevention is the only approach. Remove all PTFE-coated items from the home.

## Things Every New Cockatiel Owner Should Know

### **This is a 15 to 25 year commitment.**

A cockatiel adopted today may outlive multiple cats and dogs. Go in fully aware of the lifespan.

### **Remove all non-stick cookware from your kitchen.**

PTFE fumes are invisible, odorless, and kill birds within minutes. This is not negotiable.

### **Night frights are real and manageable.**

Learn what causes them and set up the environment to minimize them before your bird comes home.

### **Seeds are a treat, not a diet.**

Transition to pellets and fresh chop for a dramatically longer, healthier life.

### **Never put nesting items in the cage.**

They trigger hormonal behavior and chronic egg-laying in females. Comfortable perches are all they need.

### **Pet only on the head and cheeks.**

Petting below the neck promotes hormonal behavior in all parrots.

### **Find an avian vet before you need one.**

Not all vets see birds. Cockatiels hide illness and decline quickly. Have a vet identified before an emergency occurs.

### **Questions? We're Here!**

Boggy's Buddies is always happy to answer questions. Reach us at [boggysbuddies@gmail.com](mailto:boggysbuddies@gmail.com) or find us on Facebook and Instagram.