

COCKATIEL CARE GUIDE

Nymphicus hollandicus · Know before you bring one home

ORIGIN
Australia

SIZE
30–33 cm

WEIGHT
75–110 g

LIFESPAN
15–25+ years

NOISE
Moderate

TALKING
Whistles; some words

Personality & behaviour

- Affectionate, undemanding by parrot standards, and keen to be near their people. Males whistle and mimic more; hens are usually quieter and often steadier. Cockatiels rarely bite hard.
- The crest is a live emotion gauge: held high and forward means alert and curious, flattened hard against the head means frightened or angry, and gently back means relaxed. Hissing with an open beak from inside a cage corner is fear, not aggression — give space.
- Use positive reinforcement only — never hit, shout at or frighten a bird for biting or vocalising.

Housing & cage setup

- Minimum 90 × 60 × 75 cm — cockatiels are long-tailed and need horizontal space, so a 120 cm long cage is much better. Bar spacing 12–14 mm; 16 mm is wide enough for a small hen to trap her head.
- Natural branch perches (12–20 mm), shreddable toys, a shallow bathing dish and a cuttlebone. Leave the tail room to hang — tail feathers worn ragged against the bars mean the cage is too small.

Time, company & noise

- 2–4 hours out of the cage daily, plus company in the room. Cockatiels are flock birds that flock-call when they lose sight of you; answering with a whistle settles most of it.
- Moderate. Males whistle repetitively, and both sexes give a sharp flock call, but sustained screaming is unusual. Generally acceptable in a townhouse or flat.
- Foraging toys, millet in wrapped parcels, shreddable palm and paper, and whistle training. Cockatiels enjoy learning tunes.
- Provide 10–12 hours of quiet, uninterrupted darkness on a predictable schedule. Sleep-deprived parrots become irritable, scream more and are more likely to pluck. Night frights are a cockatiel-specific hazard: the bird panics in the dark and thrashes, causing broken blood feathers and head injuries. Use a low night light, keep the cage away from windows where headlights sweep, and avoid a completely dark, silent room.

What to feed

- A cockatiel-sized complete pellet as the foundation, converted gradually over weeks.
- If seed is fed, a measured 1–2 tablespoons of quality cockatiel mix per bird per day.
- Fresh greens and vegetables daily: kale, broccoli, carrot, butternut, peas, dandelion, rocket.
- Small portions of cooked whole grains and legumes.
- Millet and sunflower kernels only as occasional training rewards.
- A cuttlebone at all times — essential for hens.
- Clean fresh water daily.
- Calcium matters more in this species than most, because so many hens lay. If your hen starts laying repeatedly, see an avian vet: managing light, nesting sites and diet early is far safer than treating egg binding later. Do not remove eggs one at a time — it usually makes her lay more.

Do not feed

- Avocado — every part of the plant, including guacamole.
- Chocolate and cocoa.
- Caffeine, alcohol and xylitol (sugar-free sweetener).
- Onion, garlic, chives and leeks.
- Fruit pips and stones: apple, pear, cherry, apricot, peach and plum.
- Raw or dried beans — all legumes must be thoroughly cooked.
- Rhubarb leaves.
- Salty, sugary, fried or processed human food.
- Dairy in more than a trace — birds cannot digest lactose.
- Mouldy or fermenting food, including fruit left in the bowl.
- Anything from your mouth, plate or fork — human saliva carries bacteria that kill birds.
- Grit. Parrots husk their own seed and grit can cause fatal impaction.
- Human medicines or supplements unless prescribed by an avian vet.

Health & what to watch

- **Chronic egg-laying** in hens is very common even with no male present, and leads to egg binding and calcium depletion. Also watch for respiratory disease, cockatiel-specific proventricular dilatation disease, fatty liver and giardia.
- **Before you buy:** Ask the seller for the hatch date, the closed ring number, a DNA sex certificate and any disease screening already done. A seller who cannot answer those questions, or who will not let you watch the bird eat, is a seller to walk away from. Ask what the bird is currently eating, so you can keep it stable for the first fortnight.
- **Your first month:** Book a wellness examination in the first week, not just when something looks wrong. Quarantine a new bird for 30–45 days away from any birds you already keep, ideally in separate air space. Recommended screening: psittacine beak and feather disease (PBFD), psittacosis (*Chlamydia psittaci*), polyomavirus and avian bornavirus.
- **Ongoing & human health:** Annual check-ups, moving to twice yearly for larger species over ten. Wing clipping is not routine care — discuss it first, because flight builds fitness, balance and confidence. Psittacosis passes to people as a flu-like illness or pneumonia: if you develop unexplained respiratory symptoms, tell your doctor you keep birds.

Who this species suits

- **First-time owners:** Yes — with the budgie, one of the two genuinely good first parrots, provided the dust and the twenty-year lifespan are understood.
- **Experienced owners:** A gentle, easy companion; often kept alongside more demanding species.
- **Families & children:** One of the best family parrots, for children roughly seven and up with supervision. Note that cockatiels produce fine white powder down — households with asthma, COPD or allergies should think carefully, and an air purifier plus weekly bathing helps.

Before you decide

- I can manage feather dust in my home, and no one here has asthma made worse by it.
- I will use a night light and place the cage away from sweeping headlights.
- I can give 2–4 hours of out-of-cage time and company every day.
- I accept a commitment of fifteen to twenty-five years.
- If several answers are “No”, this is not the right bird for you — and walking away is a good outcome.

Urgent — see an avian vet today

- Difficulty or open-mouth breathing
- Pronounced tail bobbing at rest
- Fluffed, quiet and sitting on the cage floor
- Collapse or severe weakness
- Bleeding that does not stop, including a broken blood feather
- Seizures or loss of balance
- Repeated vomiting or regurgitation
- Not eating, or noticeable weight loss
- Straining, a swollen abdomen, or a hen unable to pass an egg
- Sudden major change in droppings
- Any contact with a cat or dog, even a minor scratch
- Suspected poisoning, fumes or trauma
- A hen straining, walking oddly or sitting fluffed on the cage floor — suspect egg binding
- Night thrashing with a bleeding feather shaft

Recommended avian specialist

- **Bryanston Avian, Exotic & Small Animals Clinic**
- 99 Grosvenor Road, Bryanston, Johannesburg
- 011 706 1381 · WhatsApp 061 533 9950 · info@baesac.co.za
- Not every vet treats birds. Find your nearest avian-experienced practice before you need one.



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