

FEEDING COCKATIELS

FOR FITNESS AND BREEDING

by CAROLYN HOLTBY

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It is tempting to leave the purchase of new stock until the early spring, thus avoiding winter seed bills as well as the daily aviary chores throughout the period when the weather is at its coldest.

However, to have healthy, contented and productive birds they need to be brought to a peak of fitness and breeding condition gradually. This high point should coincide with the beginning of the warmer weather and longer hours of daylight.

When dealing with newly-purchased stock, certain criteria need to be satisfied before breeding begins. At the most basic level, the pair of birds needs to be: (a) unrelated to each other; (b) of the opposite sex; (c) mature enough to breed - over one year for Cockatiels; (d) properly pair-bonded; (e) to feel at home and establish their "territory" before being presented with a nest-box; (f) fed regularly throughout the winter resting period with a special nutritional programme composed of rearing and conditioning foods.

Such conditioning foods should be offered in addition to the normal seed diet. These will bring the birds into full health and breeding condition and will also allow the Cockatiels to become accustomed to the foods they will be fed when rearing hatchlings.

The majority of seed-eating birds, and Parakeets and Cockatiels in particular, will benefit from the use of one of the proprietary egg-based softfoods, either used on its own as a rearing food or as a base in which to include other nutritious extras. Most manufacturers go to great lengths to ensure that the vitamin and mineral balance of their products is perfect for aviary birds. The food is sold as a dry mixture and should be mixed to a moist, crumbly consistency with a little cold water before being offered to the birds. When stored properly they will retain their full potency and freshness for about six months, which makes purchasing an economical proposition at the start of the season.

Having selected a brand that the birds enjoy - it is best to find this out before the chicks begin to hatch - try not to keep changing it while the youngsters are being raised. Cockatiels are conservative creatures and will often refuse an unfamiliar food for some weeks.

Once incubation is well-established, the incidence of feeding the softfood may be increased from twice a week to at least once a day when the chicks appear. It can be quickly prepared mixed with water, as described above, and is a complete food in itself. However, I like to add some frozen sweetcorn (thawed in the microwave) as my Cockatiels really enjoy this treat. Other wholesome ingredients can be included, like a few coarse-grade organic porridge oats, wholemeal breadcrumbs, or even a little mashed hard-boiled egg.

It is wise to keep these additions to no more than one at any feeding, as too many extras in the basic mixture tends to upset the balance of protein and nutrients so carefully worked out by the manufacturers. By adding just a small quantity of one of the above choices, the diet can be varied.

Adult Cockatiels and their youngsters should be supplied with a good range of small seeds plus sunflower seed, a constant supply of clean cuttlefish-bone, mixed mineral grit and an iodine mineral block. Fresh drinking water daily is essential. The addition of the rearing food daily will supply all the requirements of a Cockatiel; however, the dietary extras fed to larger Parrots and Parakeets can often also benefit Cockatiels and their youngsters.

Any of the following can be offered in addition to the foregoing in rotation: bread and milk; sprouted pulses (well rinsed); sprouted mung beans; chunks of raw carrot; chickweed; salad greens; lightly cooked pulses (cook until soft as undercooked, dried pulses can retain toxic substances); cooked maize; willow twigs and branches (stripped of leaves but buds remaining); soaked and well-rinsed seeds, including sunflower, millet sprays.

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