



## THE BIRD CLINIC VETERINARY CORPORATION

### COCKATIEL CONCERNS AND SYNDROMES

These small affectionate birds we call cockatiels, *Nymphicus hollandicus*, have undergone a great deal of evolution through their extensive breeding in captivity. With the breeding pressure to develop new colors, behaviors, and temperament, problems have occurred. These problems are the focus of this newsletter. The types of mutations seen in cockatiels will be discussed followed by the problems of "Night Panic", "Poor Immunity", "Baby Traumas", "Reproductive Disorders" and "Aberrant Behavior".

#### MUTATION TYPES

Color variations (mutations) have increased in numbers over the many years as breeders gained more interest in the cockatiel. The "Wild-type" or "Normal" cockatiel that is the foundation of all mutations is referred to as a "Grey" cockatiel with mature males having that characteristic bright orange cheek patch with a white hallow surrounding it. All other color variations are mutations from this gene pool. These include: variations of Cinnamon, Charcoal or "White-faced", Pearl, Albino, Lutino ("White"), Pied (multi-colored), "Yellow-faced" (1990), "Pastel-faced" (1993) and "Green" cockatiels. By 2020 the "Grey" cockatiel unfortunately has become an almost extinct variant in the California pet trade.

Pearl cockatiels as immature birds have "pearling" in both sexes on their wings. This gives the feathering a 'scalloped' look to the wings as well as alternating dark and light 'bar' on their tail feathers. However, at maturity (>8 months) the male loses this color variation as his hormone levels increase and reverts to the "Normal" wild type. He will pass on his "pearl" genes in subsequent breeding, but will not regain his pearl color pattern in later life. True albino cockatiels are all white with red eye color. Many times Lutino (yellow colored) are confused with these and called "White" cockatiels. Lutino's have variability in their white feathers, but consistently throw a light yellow or yellowish hue to their feathers. A 'Pied' variation means "two colored". These birds have a base color on the body and head but varying degrees of grey feathers on their wings, around their eyes, chest, and/or tail.

Through the process of mutation, some white or lutino lines, including the pied and albinos have developed what might be called behavioral aberrations or mental / physical / immunity retardation that can cause the bird, as well as its owner, much stress and even injury. Because of this, the following recommendations are given however many have been minimized over the years through improved diet (pellets) and breeding practices.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OWNERS

1. All "White" or "Lutino" lines **should** have a nightlight near their cage to prevent "*night panic*" or "*night fright*". This sudden flailing of the wings at night with subsequent injury was believed to be caused by a loss of the bird's "foot-locking" ability during sleep, causing them to fall off their perch at night. In fact, the flailing results from presumed "predation" in the dark with an attempt to fly up to safety. Covering the cage and improper perch diameter will amplify this problem since the bird cannot get its grip or bearing as quickly. Because of this, it is recommended to **NOT cover any bird cages** and have a perch circumference that bird's foot can reach 65-75% around. Covering cages also do NOT keep the pet bird warm and is but another 'wives' tale' passed down through the ages. The bird is incapable of heating all the air space under the cover so it will have no effect on maintaining or increasing the birds temperature.



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2. These mutations should be observed more closely for signs of weakness and a lack of resistance to disease states. It is believed that these mutations have an overall poorly developed immune system. Calcium deficiency and mineral imbalances have been seen often in young cockatiels, but respond well to nutritional therapy. Again the key to minimize these problems is to convert these birds to commercial pelleted diets from the very inadequate seed diets sold in the pet trade.
3. Prolonged therapy may be necessary for the treatment of disease in these lines due to this poor immunity.
4. Be careful when anyone clips nails or wings as some of these birds have poor clotting mechanisms and may bleed excessively (underlying calcium deficiency) If this occurs, please have the bird evaluated for nutritional deficiencies.
5. Babies also have extremely poor navigational skills as juveniles. Owners should be **EXTREMELY** careful not to let them jump or fall from heights over 2-3 feet if their wings have been clipped. This can cause severe tears to the perianal (vent) or chest regions with subsequent bleeding and infection. This problem often requires surgical repair and antibiotics. Not clipping babies until they have very good flying skills can minimize this problem dramatically.
6. A good "balanced" diet is of utmost importance to maintain as healthy a bird as possible! Protein in their diet as well as ample vitamins and minerals are essential. As these birds get older, obesity with subsequent diabetes, liver and heart disease are more common especially in the female gender. Again, currently, the best prevention is to have the main diet for these birds' diet be a commercially balanced formulated pellet and at The BIRD Clinic we can give our clients current recommendations on various pellet brands for cockatiels.
7. Egg layers should be carefully watched and supplemented with calcium and vitamins (if not on pelleted diet) to prevent egg binding, soft-shelled eggs, egg-yolk peritonitis, bone fractures, or heart failure from depleted calcium stores. Owners with hens that are laying eggs, without males present, should leave the eggs in the cage until she obtains a clutch (6-8 eggs) and remove the eggs about 11 days later. This will help *prevent overlaying* and further depletion of calcium and the bird's nutritional state. **Do not** offer these birds' mirrors or bells or they will bond to their "image" which increases sexual activity. **Do not** give them bird tents or cover the cage as this further stimulates nesting behavior and increases the risk of egg laying. Also, sunflower seeds in the food both give high fat and phytoestrogens that can increase ovarian activity and should not be offered.
8. Be aware of frightening episodes caused by earthquakes and their aftershocks, thunderstorms, hailstorms, or days/nights with heavy winds. Fear caused by these events can cause uncontrollable flapping (flailing) with the possibility of broken blood feathers or wing injury. These birds are more easily aroused than their "grey" counterparts. A temporary "*psych ward*" may be necessary to protect the bird (see "[How to Make a Hospital Box](#)" handout).
9. Look for those individuals that demonstrate "*aberrant behaviors*" or appear not normal mentally. Birds have been known to press their head into a corner of the cage and not move or wedge a body part between openings in the cage and get caught. When they are released, within minutes, they place themselves back in the same dangerous situation.



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10. Use soft towels while restraining these birds to avoid aggravating their high-strung nature during handling.
11. All cockatiels by 7-10 weeks of age should obtain a lean body weight of 85-100gms. If a cockatiel is below this range or above this range there is something most likely wrong with the individual and should be investigated.

### **CONCLUSION**

This complex set of problems in cockatiels has not been fully defined, but The BIRD Clinic has researched many of these conditions and has concluded that genetics as well as nutritional deficiencies in the parents each play a role. Some of these problems are arising in the "normal" lines as well. This could be from back-breeding to the lutino lines or from the intense breeding pressures put on some of these birds. For now, the above description should be used as a guideline to help cockatiel owners maintain as healthy of a pet as possible.

*This publication is part of The BIRD C News™ series to help educate bird owners. Produced by The BIRD Clinic Veterinary Corporation  
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*Revised Apr 19, 2024*