

Gain Cockatiel's Trust

A bird owner asks how to gain a cockatiel's trust.

By Sally Blanchard

Q: I have a cockatiel. I have had him a couple of weeks. He will not let me near him, I can't touch him. He won't step up on my finger. He bites. I have taken him out of the cage and when sit on the floor with him he runs or flies away. I whistle and talk to him every morning before work and at night. I also leave his cage open in the evenings to let him come out on his own. He rarely does. How can I best go about training him and getting him to trust me?

A: From your description, my guess is that you have purchased a cockatiel from a source that didn't socialize him to learn to trust handling by people. These cockatiels have to be tamed by the new people in their lives. Since he was never handled, he is simply not used to it and is most likely afraid of you. Biting is his way of dealing with that fear, and his way to get you to leave him alone. The first step is to win his trust, and this may take awhile. If you haven't taken him to a veterinarian yet, I recommend doing so. Ask the vet to trim a few of his feathers; no more than three or four feathers off of each wing. Once he is tame to you, you can then allow him more flight if you want him to.

Pay attention to your cockatiel's food preferences. If you find that he has a favorite food, even if it something that is not particularly healthy for him (like sunflower seeds), take it out of what you feed him in his cage. Take his cage into a bedroom and place it on the bed. Sit on the bed and open the cage. Hold some of his favorite food in the palm of your hand near the cage door, but look away from the bird. If you are intently staring at him, he will most likely run away. Direct eye contact can be threatening. You can also slowly place your hand in his cage with his favorite treat in your palm. Be patient and don't try to force him to do anything. The key is to gradually pattern him to accept you and trust your hand near him. Cockatiels are very social birds, and he will want to be with you once he learns to trust you.

However, although most cockatiels like a good head skritch they are rarely cuddly birds. One of the best ways to interact with him is to talk to him. Label everything that you do consistently. For example if you say something like, "Hi Buddy, do you want to come out?" He will learn to understand that this is an invitation for him to come out of his cage. In this way, each time you start to work with him, you can use words so that he will know what you are going to do.