

Step-By-Step Training for Budgies/Parakeets & Cockatiels

Improve your relationship with your budgie/parakeet and cockatiel with these pet bird training tips.

By Diane Grindol

Bird owners who are able to successfully handle their budgies (parakeets) or cockatiels are more likely to have a rich and enjoyable relationship with their pets.

Set socialization (taming and training) goals at the outset. A bird that isn't socialized might be afraid of you and probably can't be handled. Besides not being much fun, this can be dangerous in emergency situations when it's necessary to handle your pet. The minimum you should aim for is for your bird to come out of its cage on command by stepping onto a stick or your finger. You should be able to put the bird back into its cage without a fuss, too.

Wing-Feather Trims For Budgies & Cockatiels

When working with a new cockatiel or budgie (also known as a parakeet), have the wing feathers trimmed to ensure easier and safer training and taming. The outlet where you got your bird should have done this for you. If not, a veterinarian, some bird shops, a bird groomer or a bird breeder can help.

When your bird is in new surroundings, trimmed wings prevent it from flying into windows or mirrors. Your bird is more dependent on you for transportation and will soon realize the value of your assistance.

This said, I have found that young birds should be allowed to learn to fly before their wing feathers are trimmed. They need to learn to handle their bodies, particularly their wings and tail, to slow themselves down and to land gracefully.

Commence Training With Budgies & Cockatiels

When you first bring your new bird home, give it a few hours to look around and get accustomed to its surrounding. If the bird is older or fearful, build trust by talking to it in a soothing voice. Whenever you pass the cage, tell your bird it is beautiful. Whistle and chortle quietly, and drop a small treat in your bird's dish. Once you have built some basic trust, you'll be able to work with your bird outside the cage.

Budgies & Cockatiels: Coming Out of the Cage

You can get an untamed bird out of its cage in one of two ways. If you don't want to ruffle any feathers, take your time and try coaxing your bird out. Your bird should be accustomed to being fed a treat through the cage bars by now. This time, open the cage door and offer the treat outside of the cage. If your cage door opens down to make a landing, place a treat or a dish of treats on the door. This will entice your bird to come out.

A faster way to get your bird out of its cage is to reach in and capture it with your hands. This should be done quickly and gently with little chasing around the cage. Over time, you'll teach your bird to hop on your finger, but you can't do that until it comes out of the cage.

I often use a hand towel to restrain a bird. Make a "V" out of your pointer finger and your middle finger, and put those around your bird's neck. Hold it by the cheekbones with your fingers, and support its back with the palm of your hand. Keep your thumb and the rest of your hand on the other side to keep its wings folded up. This keeps it safe. Remember to use gentle pressure. This type of handling allows your bird to breathe because it leaves the chest free from restraint.

Work Away From The Pet Bird Cage

Take your bird to a small room of the house where doorways can be closed off. A bathroom or hallway is ideal. If there are windows in the room, window coverings should be drawn to keep your bird safe. (In a bathroom, remember to put the toilet-seat cover down.)

Plan to spend some time here with your bird. Take a book and settle in, releasing your bird near you. Every once in a while, talk to your bird. Most cockatiels and budgies are curious birds, so it's likely your bird will choose to come poking around you.

When your bird seems comfortable, make a slow move toward it with your hand. By doing this, you are teaching it to become accustomed to this movement. This is an important process in training and taming your budgie or cockatiel.

If things goes well, encourage your bird to step onto your finger. Guide the bird by placing one hand behind it. This will also help stop the bird from backing away. With the other hand, push your long index finger into the bird's chest above its feet. It will automatically step up onto your finger. At the same time, say, "Up," "Step up" or "Come" — whichever command you want to use with your bird. All your actions should be slow and calm.

During this exercise, your bird will either step onto your finger as described and stay there; get on your finger, then fly off; or scuttle away in fear.

If your bird flies away, go back to working on just staying quietly nearby. Keep practicing approaching your bird and putting your hand near your bird without actually touching it.

If your bird flies off your finger, retrieve it, practicing the "Up" command over and over as you lift the bird off the floor. Retrieve it every time it flies off. You need to be patient and consistent. If your bird becomes exhausted or overly frightened, stop the session.

Keeping Your Budgie & Cockatiel With You

It's nice to be able to keep your bird on your hand once it's there, and also while you are moving around. You can do this in a couple of ways. One method is to teach your bird that you are going to put your thumb on its feet when you are moving. Get your bird used to this gradually by briefly touching its feet with your thumb. After awhile, touch its feet for a longer time. Eventually, hold the bird's feet down with your thumb.

The other method to restrain your bird while it is perched on your hand is to hold your other hand over its wings. A bird can't fly away from you when its wings are lightly held against its body. I find this method especially helpful when returning reluctant birds to their cage.

Start training this by simply touching your bird's back lightly while you are holding him. Once the bird comes to accept this, apply more pressure. Eventually, your bird will accept light restraint across the back and wings.

Next, start teaching your bird to allow you to turn it on its back. This is not a natural position for cockatiels, but they will be held like this at the veterinarian's office, so it's good to teach them to accept this type of handling.

Practice the Step up in the cage, too. Quickly ask it to step "Up" again onto your hand, and take it right back out of the cage. Do this many times for several days before moving to the next step.

The more your cockatiel or budgie begins to trust you, the more tame and social it will become. Work at your bird's own pace so that it can gain confidence. It will begin to look forward to your training sessions.