

Small Birds: Get Your Pet Birds To Whistle

Budgies and cockatiels can learn to vocalize and change their repertoire

By Diane Grindol

Q: How can I get my budgies and cockatiels to whistle? How can I change their whistling repertoire?

A: There are several factors that determine success in developing good whistlers in your flock, including the species, sex and age of your pet birds. It also depends somewhat on whether you have a single companion bird or whether you house several birds together.

Female cockatiels and budgies do not naturally mimic or whistle, so you're unlikely to have much success with them. The natural call of male cockatiels is a whistle, so they're likely to enjoy this type of training, and because budgies naturally chatter, they'll learn to whistle and talk, too. Listen carefully, because budgies talk fast and in high-pitched voices. Budgies do mimic, so if you're really bent on having a whistling budgie, do a lot of whistling around yours. Be aware that a budgie whistle will be worked into its natural chatter, and that it will have a budgie accent to it.

Small Birds: Friendship Between Cockatiels Turns Sour

Temporary separation may be the best solution for pet birds in fights. [More>>](#)Cockatiels learn a repertoire of whistles or words well when they are young. After they are 2 years old or so, however, their repertoire doesn't seem to change much. Hopefully, you have a young male bird and will work with it diligently when he is most likely to learn. This doesn't mean that your older male won't learn a new tune. There's no reason he cannot keep learning, it's just more likely to happen with young birds.

A male cockatiel that is the only bird in a talkative household is the most successful at learning vocalizations. If you keep cockatiels or budgies with pet birds of the same species, be aware that they will learn the flock language. The flock language between budgies and between cockatiels is strictly "bird." If a single pet becomes part of your family flock, it will be more likely to learn your native language or whistling than the bird that is kept with other birds.

Even when pet birds do not learn to repeat words that you say or your whistles, they are still learning from you. Talk intelligently to your bird using words like "hello, good-bye, good night, shower, treat and seed" in a consistent way, and you will find that your bird will respond to them.

It seems that the wolf whistle is especially easy for male cockatiels to learn, but start whistling other tunes as well. Cockatiels whistle well, and young males are able to learn pop tunes, melodic whistling, jingles and short expressive whistles. One of my cockatiels learned to imitate a complex car alarm. He likes to "go off" about 6 a.m. on summer mornings. Once your pet birds learn to whistle, they can pick up all kinds of things.

Change Their Tune

If your cockatiels or budgies are whistling a tune that you want to modify or drop from their repertoire, stop giving them any feedback for that whistle. When you hear them making it, respond with a whistle you would rather hear instead. If your pet birds make any attempt to change their whistle, whether it sounds like the new whistle or not, reward them with attention and excitement by using the desired new whistle yourself. If you try this for a couple weeks and the offending whistle still isn't going away, then try "whispering."

When the offending whistle reappears, respond with a soft whistle of your own or whisper a word. Your pet birds will be both curious about what you are doing and will probably want to match the low volume level that you are modeling for them. If this whistle doesn't disappear over time, at least it's at a lower volume.