

Cockatiel Is Afraid Of Owner's Hand

Training your cockatiel to not fear your hand.

Q: I have a pet cockatiel named Cocktail. He eats from my hand and isn't afraid of my hand while eating, but when there's no food in it, he's afraid of my hand. Could you tell me why this is? Also, where would you recommend putting your bird? Is outside good because of the fresh air, or is indoors better because of temperature control?

Linda S. Rubin explains:

From what you have described here, it sounds as though you are in the middle of training, but it is not yet complete. You are training your cockatiel to be less afraid of your hand by associating it with food. This appears to be working while you are holding food but not when your hand is empty, so we can assume that the food that you are using for training are some of his favorite treats.

How you approach your cockatiel when your hand is empty is key. Timing, patience and attitude can be everything during training. Try moving in slow, careful, deliberate strides toward the cage while talking softly in a comforting voice. Take your time; you are in no hurry. Then slowly, gradually and fluidly, open the cage door. Allow your cockatiel several sessions until it is comfortable. Next, hold your hand near the cage door with the index finger extended. This might take a number of sessions, which should be kept to five to 10 minutes in duration. This is the extent of your pet's attention span.

The goal is to eventually reach your bird's lower breast and apply light pressure under the breast and above the legs to throw your cockatiel off balance, while saying the command, "Up." Your pet will then instinctively step up on to your finger. You can then reward him with a "Good bird!" Once your cockatiel is used to stepping up on your finger, tempt it out of the cage with favorite treats. This is only advisable if your cockatiel has trimmed wing feathers so that it will not crash into walls or harm itself. You must "cockatiel-proof" the room first by closing all windows, covering mirrors and hiding or adjusting other dangers that are evident.

Do not be alarmed if your cockatiel first reaches out to your finger with its beak, which all birds in the parrot family sometimes use as an extra "arm" to help themselves climb upward. Keep your hand completely steady, do not flinch, pull away or alarm your bird, or the training will be undone and trust will be broken. Older cockatiels can be set in their ways and become frightened or defensive when others come into their cage or "territory," which is why tempting an older bird out of the cage can sometimes work. Otherwise, train in a neutral area such as working with your bird while it is on a birdie playground or perch stand.

Cockatiels need to feel safe, so wherever you place the cage, be sure it is high enough to be out of the reach of children, other household pets or predators like cats and dogs. Also, avoid high-traffic areas so your bird can get some rest.

In regard to whether indoor or outdoor housing is best, consistency in temperature is more important than the precise temperature, although cockatiels are a desert bird from arid regions and appreciate room-temperature climate. However, do not allow the temperature to drop, for example, 10 degrees one day, then go up 20 degrees the next, and so on. Such ongoing temperature extremes can cause illness. A cockatiel can be taken outside in a secure cage or live in an outdoor aviary as long as there is shelter provided to escape drafts, the elements and extreme temperature changes. Cockatiels are very susceptible to sunstroke, so always cover half the cage on sunny days, provide enough water, and carefully monitor and protect your pet from both the natural elements and wild predation or other pets gaining access to their caging. If your cockatiel appears alarmed when outdoors, placing the cage in a room with an open window for fresh air can suffice; however, be sure to check that the cage is not in the path of a draft.