

Cockatiel Brooding

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Q: My older female 'tiel, Sunshine, has laid four eggs in 17 years. Last night she exhibited behavior exactly like she did when she laid those eggs so many years ago. After hours of this crazy flying around, screaming and "squatting", she settled down and went to bed. No egg. Should we be worried?

Linda S. Rubin explains:

First, allow me to congratulate you on owning a 17-year-old female cockatiel. Although many male cockatiels live well into their late teens and through their 20s, we don't hear of many females fairing as well. Your female's good health and longevity is most likely due to her being able to exercise outside her cage, which is also important in developing egg-laying muscles, as many female cockatiels will lay eggs at some time in their lives as you have experienced.

The screaming and squatting you describe, along with "whimpering" sounds and trembling wings - indicate a female who is "broody." Broody hens will begin to act anxious, sometimes frantically seeking a nesting site, whether a favorite bookshelf, under the bed, or tearing up papers at the bottom of the cage. If hormone levels are rising, then chances are you will eventually find one or more eggs.

Never remove eggs from a female who is either laying or sitting eggs. Provide plenty of calcium in the form of fresh cuttlebone, oyster shell, chicken eggshells (baked 45 minutes in the oven at 350 degrees) and other commercial calcium supplements. Egg-laying cockatiels require enough calcium to form the shell that surrounds each of its eggs, or your cockatiel will draw the necessary calcium from its own skeleton and risk soft bones prone to breaking, and osteoporosis. Feed a varied diet with plenty of fresh green food – the leaves also are a rich source of calcium – and watch her closely.

Most female cockatiels will abandon their eggs on their own once the 18 to 23 day incubation period is over for the last egg laid, or perhaps sit an extra week or two. If you remove the eggs prematurely, your cockatiel will only lay more to make up for the ones "lost" or removed. If no eggs appear and you observe signs of egg-binding, such as "penguin-like" posture, tail-pumping, weakness, listlessness, or decreased appetite, provide a heated environment (heating pad or hot water bottle under the cage or carrier) and rush your cockatiel to an avian veterinarian as a medical emergency. If, however, your cockatiel has had plenty of exercise and a varied diet rich in calcium, there is seldom need to worry. Disturb her as little as possible and make certain she is eating well by placing foods within easy reach if she is reluctant to leave her eggs to feed herself.