

Find A Mentor Before Beginning To Breed Birds

An experienced, quality breeder to be your mentor. Learning from their experiences will help prevent a great deal of heartbreak

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By Penny Corbett

A few months ago, I purchased 10 pairs of breeding cockatiels. I wanted to get into the business of supplying cockatiels to pet shops. I have never owned a bird before, but I was told by the breeder I bought my birds from that all I had to do was give them nest boxes and reap the profits. The breeder was getting out of the bird business.

I don't have any babies or eggs, and three of the breeder birds died. I did what I was told, and I even gave them water bottles so they didn't get dirty water dishes. I give them food and change the water when I clean the cages every weekend. I talked to the vet office after the last bird died and was told to bring in the bird. The vet said the bird had some Pseudomonas (bacteria) and to bring in a couple of the other birds. I think I was sold sick birds. What do you think? Will more breeder birds die?

Your plan is to breed cockatiels to supply pet shops. Do you also plan to hand-feed the young? Do you have experience hand-feeding cockatiels? Hand-feeding is a full-time job with responsibilities not to be taken lightly. Your experience or lack of it will affect the lives of the chicks involved.

If these birds were such a gold mine and breeding them were as simple as hanging a nest box and reaping the profits, why would anyone quit the business and sell the geese that lay golden eggs? Some of the information provided by this person might not be quite that accurate.

You have already found out that breeding birds is a bit more involved than giving pairs of birds "nest boxes and reaping the profits." This may seem to be the case for a few people here and there but, when you are dealing with a larger number of pairs and/or over a length of time, most bird breeders will tell you that breeding birds is not that easy.

Find A Mentor Ask an experienced, quality breeder to be your mentor. Learning from their experiences will help prevent a great deal of heartbreak for you. A mentor can guide you along the way and will help with your questions and problems. Challenges, both large and small, will be encountered. The guidance provided to you by a good mentor could be the difference between success and failure. At the very least, it will be a helping hand as you proceed.

Ask your mentor to teach you the proper way to hand-feed. If at all possible, offer your hand-feeding services so you can gain experience under your mentor's supervision.

Plan Of Action I cannot say if the cockatiels you purchased were healthy. It is possible they were in good health, and the problem you are now experiencing began in your aviary. The length of time that passed since your purchase to the beginning of your problems may make it difficult for your vet to provide you with a definite answer. Speak with your veterinarian regarding these concerns.

If you have not done so already, contact the vet, and make arrangements to have your birds examined. Remove all of the nest boxes until the problem is resolved. Take this time to inspect and clean the nest boxes. Clean and disinfect every cage, dish and water bottle thoroughly. If you cannot clean the water bottles thoroughly, trash them and purchase new bottles or use dishes.

Basic Management Feed and water the birds at least once a day. Pairs feeding chicks may require an extra feeding depending on the size of the food dish and clutch they are feeding. Discard any soft foods not eaten within a couple of hours. Check to make sure pieces of soft food are not left behind to spoil.

Water bottles are great in theory. Problems arise when they are not properly cleaned each day. We often have the misconception that if it looks clean, it is clean. It may be necessary to clean and change the water more than once daily. Water containers can be a major source of illness. It is not unusual for Pseudomonas to be traced to the water source.

Dietary needs differ during the stages of breeding. Food offered to parents when feeding young may vary by preference

between pairs. Providing an adequate, good-quality supply of food items in addition to the basic diet helps chicks get a good start. Review the diet with your vet and/or your mentor, and make changes as needed.

Organize, Organize, Organize This would be a good time to catch all of the adults and record their band number, sex and mutation. Each bird will have its own card with this information. Use the card back to record specific data on each individual bird. This will be the start of your record keeping. Provide each breeding cage with a nest box card that contains the band number and mutation of each parent bird along with the cage number. Record each egg and lay date on the nest box card. List hatch date and band number as the chicks are hatched and banded (consult with your mentor about how to band). All of the information will be in one place for easy access, and there will be no need to guess the parents or the hatch date of a chick. Record problems for future reference toward better management.

Inventory the equipment you have for rearing chicks. Do you have brooders to house chicks in need of supplemental heat? Are they in working order? Are they clean and disinfected? Do you have enough clean cages to house babies? Have you thought of a good location to place brooders and baby cages? Time, thought and preparation invested now will help the hectic breeding season go more smoothly.

Ten pairs of cockatiels can be overwhelming for a beginning bird breeder. Servicing and cleaning cages is only part of the work involved. Caring for the chicks produced by this pair will add to the workload, not to mention the time and energy involved in hand-feeding. Everyone is different, what is too much for one may be easy for another. When your birds have received a clean bill of health, you may want to review your breeding plan.

Unfortunately, you are having bad experiences with your first attempt breeding cockatiels. If you decide to continue in this venture you will learn from these and other experiences along the way.

Columnist Penny J. Corbett has been breeding birds for more than 25 years. She has experience showing and judging many species, including color-bred and type canaries, finches, and softbills. She currently breeds mainly hookbills.