

Damaged Cockatiel Tail Feathers

If your cockatiel lands badly when it attempts to fly, it may never have learned to use its rudder (tail).

By Diane Grindol

Is it better to leave a cockatiel's broken tail feathers in or to pluck them?

Consider your cockatiel's health first. It takes extra nutrition to grow in feathers. If your pet bird is not breeding or stressed and is fairly young, she can probably handle it. When pulling a tail feather, support the bird well. If you don't want to pull her feathers or have a concern about her stress level, you can trim the tail feathers so they are even and not dangling, and at the next molt, they'll grow in whole again.

Take steps to prevent your pet cockatiel from getting broken tail feathers in the future. Some young cockatiel chicks' wing feathers have been trimmed before the birds ever learn to fly. They know they should be able to fly and take leaps off of high places, but plummet to the ground or end up sitting on their tail feathers, having no idea how to spread their tail and use it as a rudder for landing.

Before you start calling anyone bad names for trimming the feathers of cockatiels that have not yet learned to fly, realize that it has been customary to do so. Imagine what it's like to fledge a bunch of young cockatiels. The youngsters zip all over, often don't know how to land, flutter at the ceiling or threaten to land in an unreachable part of the house. They're in constant danger of escaping outside.

Despite the chaos, it is advisable to allow a cockatiel to learn to fly, land and control its body before its wing feathers are drastically trimmed. This can mean gradually trimming wing feathers to slow down the adventurous flyers. For example, you could cut two feathers a week, curtailing flight and slowly ending up with a trimmed bird.

Next time you trim your cockatiel, you could leave her flight feathers longer or cut fewer of them, so there's a chance she could glide to the floor and avoid injury, instead of going ker-thump on the floor.

Even better, let your cockatiel's wing feathers grow out and allow her to fly for a season. Teach her to fly to you, to land on designated areas and to control her body. It's great exercise for her and should increase her agility and confidence. At a future time you may wish to trim her wing feathers again, but will find that she knows more about landing and can do so more safely.