

Flight of the Cockatiel

The little birds who rarely make it back home

By Megan Churches

If your pet bird escapes through an inadvertently open door, you need not accept that they are lost to you forever. Escapees can be reunited with their owners - with a little effort. WIRES (wildlife rescue) carers in the inner city have been inundated with a variety of lost pet birds - cockatiels being the main culprits. Cockatiels being small, light bodied birds are almost impossible to keep grounded, even with a close wing clip.

A gust of wind and a bit of panic, and they're off - and having no experience with free flight little cockatiels no way to find their way home once the adrenaline rush has faded. Also, since they're not savvy to the ways of the wild, they have no way to feed themselves, nor any idea how to relate to wild birds or the dangers they pose.

The luckiest of these little charmers will find their way into temporary care with WIRES, members of the public, or at local vets. But others may be not so lucky. These tame little birds are ill prepared for the outside world and are often attacked by wild birds like Currawongs and Magpies. It's a sad fact that many don't stand a chance.

The best thing is to escape-proof your home, but this is easier said than done - it doesn't take more than a moment's inattention - the door opens a crack - and vroom! You can maximise your chances of getting your birds back by following a few simple steps. Since you have invested time, effort and love into your pet, don't write him off without trying to find him.

Microchipping: The issue of chipping your birds is generally dealt with at the individual vet's websites. But in general, cockatiels aren't chipped because people either don't know about microchipping birds or cockatiels are too little.

Avian vet, Sandy Hodgins, from Summer Hill Village Vet, and Bird and Exotics website says birds under 100 grams aren't routinely chipped, since it requires an anaesthetic and the chip to be placed under the muscle in the chest.

Cockatiels usually weigh between 80 and 100 grams. Mandi Griffith (vet nurse) from Canley Heights Vet Practice says only exotic birds get routinely checked for chips. Since many cockatiels aren't chipped, stray ones are rarely scanned, therefore many people believe chipping a small bird is pointless.

So what do you do when you lose your cockatiel?

Ring the local vets: The first thing to do is to call the local vets. All of them. This is the single most successful thing you can do. It's human nature that people find the bird and drop it off at the local vet. Remember that your bird might get quite a distance before being found. And the person finding him might drop him off at their own local vet - which might not be quite so close to you. The vets will generally list the bird on Petsearch, but ultimately, if they can't rehome the bird, it will most likely be euthanased after a few weeks.

The luckiest birds are reunited with their owners. Another good outcome is for the bird to be re-homed. WIRES routinely foster quite a few birds until rehoming occurs. There's also an organization called Parrot Rescue who have foster carers as well. WIRES rescuees are unable to be returned to the pet trade - they cannot be re-sold through pet shops - so unless a new home is found, the outlook for the bird is poor. WIRES carers advertise on their intranet, for new homes - but there is a limit to how many birds can be absorbed into their rescue community.

Petsearch: Petsearch lists hundreds of lost cockatiels - and they say comparatively few of the birds are reunited with their owners. It's almost as if people write off their cockatiels finding it easier to replace them than to look for them. Listing a lost cockatiel with Petsearch is easy. It helps if you have a photograph, the last known location, any quirks your bird has - a list of what words he knows. Last year I took in an escapee handed into the local vet. The



The Cockatiel (*Nymphicus hollandicus*), also known as the Quarrion and the Weiro, is the smallest and genuinely miniature cockatoo endemic to Australia. They are prized as a household pet throughout the world and are relatively easy to breed. As a caged bird Cockatiels are second only in popularity to the Budgerigar.

vet had him in a cage next to the cat scales - which was less than ideal, so I took him home to holiday with my pair. The next day I heard a little voice from my enclosed balcony, repeating: She sells sea shells by the sea shore... That was a pretty identifying feature for the bird. It helped him stand out from all the other grey cockatiels found in the Inner West area that month. Petsearch updated their records to reflect this, and the bird was subsequently reunited with his owner.

Leaflets: Get yourself onto your computer and make some leaflets to letterbox drop in your area. Put a good photo of the bird - a close-up if you can. Describe any identifying features, colours of beak, face and crest - leg bands, scars, clipped wings, any words he can say. Make it easy for the person finding your bird to contact you.

Put your leaflets onto telegraph poles and in shop windows. And door-knock. Don't underestimate the value of door knocking. When I lost my budgie, the neighbours remembered that I had lost my cockatiel a few months before, and brought the bird round to our block and door-knocked until they identified the apartment where the 'bird lady' lived. Knock on doors of everyone in your block and ask if you (or they) can search their backyards or balconies.

Rewards: The jury is out on rewards as to whether or not they increase the chances of reunification. I'm of the opinion that it makes little difference. If your bird's an expensive bird, and the reward is significant, maybe it might make the finder more likely to try to reunite bird with owner - I don't know. Ultimately it's up to you - what you can afford, and how desperate you are to get your pet back. Just remember - there are lots of birds being found all the time - it's just a matter of you maximising your chances of getting your pet back. It's not hard just a little work.

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