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## Caring for Your Elderly Bird

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Spottie and Luna

How many old birds do you see in the wild or remember seeing as a child? Personally, I don't remember seeing any except old chickens at the local farm. Generally we don't see older wild animals, including birds, as older animals likely become prey of other animals or they lose their ability to compete with younger birds for food and cover and therefore naturally perish.

In the absence of predators and given the comforts of being cared for by their owners, companion birds may age longer. As we humans grow older, we start needing certain things to make our lives more comfortable - maybe a hospital bed to help us get in and out of bed more easily, or a step-down tub for

bathing, or simply a hot pad for our sore back. Similarly, companion birds tend to develop certain age-related needs as they mature. Taking notice of your bird's needs as it ages will help make the experience more enjoyable for the two of you and most likely extend the bird's life. This article shares some experiences of living with an aging cockatiel, watching his behavior patterns change, modifying small things in his cage and home environment to make life easier, and discovering the need for possible medication due to age-related disease.

I have two male cockatiels at home. One is 8 and the other is 13, both still considered young for this species. The thirteen-year-old, Spottie, came to me 5 years ago as a Mickaboo adoptee and had some health issues, most of which were remedied with a better diet, more exercise and a healthy home environment. Yet as Spottie ages, I have adapted certain things in my home and his cage to adjust to his physical needs. For example, Spottie is not a good flyer due to old wing injuries. Rather than fly easily from the top of his cage, he usually plummets to the ground with a big "kerplunk", kind of like a crashing helicopter that has lost a rotor and is trying to land. As a result, Spottie has sprained his foot once or twice on impact with the hard floor. As a logical solution to prevent future injuries, I placed a large padded throw rug below the front of his cage to soften his landing. This small change to his home environment has prevented further injuries.

Spottie has also always been a bit slow to get around. The slowness may be attributable to a lack of exercise in his early years, poor nutrition from the get go, and possibly genetics. Spottie is more of a waddler than an agile sprinter and is slowly becoming less active. As he gets older, I've noticed Spottie prefers to rest on flatter, textured wooden perches instead of smaller dowel perches purchased from the pet store. Noticing how he coveted a certain spot on a homemade manzanita perch in his primary cage, I recently went searching in the nearby woods for a wider branch to serve as a perch with varied widths and textures. The new manzanita branch is much wider than usually recommended for a tiel-sized bird, but Spottie seems to gravitate to it more than any other of the perches since it provides a more stable footing and allows him to rest more easily. He still has a variety of climbing and resting perches, but providing this larger one gives him the option of "putting his feet up", cockatiel-style.

In addition to modifying some of Spottie's physical environment, I have also had to modify his diet and medicines. He and his cage-mate Luna go to an avian vet annually for wellness exams. At their most recent visit, the vet diagnosed a significant heart murmur and elevated heart rate in Spottie, conditions that had not been diagnosed previously. These could be attributed to a variety of age-related causes and so he was prescribed a beta-blocker to lower his blood pressure,

allowing the heart to pump more easily. I now have to medicate Spottie every day by oral syringe. The vet also suggested keeping him warmer to help with circulation, so I purchased an Avi-tech heating panel to place on his cage to give him the option of perching near it for warmth. This is especially good during the colder winter months.

At some point, like Spottie, your bird will enter old age and will likely require extra care similar to what Spottie has needed. Watching your bird and learning its behavior so you can notice when changes occur, whether quickly or gradually, will help you adjust to their needs and improve their quality of life. This will make for a happier home life for you and your companion birds and give you peace of mind.



Cockatiel receiving oral medication