

Egg Laying in Pet Birds

Egg laying in pet birds can be a serious health threat. This article explains why (and what to do if) your bird starts laying eggs. Providing proper, non-incandescent lighting, a healthy diet, and adequate sleep, as well as removing nesting toys or materials are key to discouraging egg laying.

Overview

In wild birds and breeding birds, egg laying is a natural, seasonal process. However, female pet birds can also lay eggs, even without the presence of a male. Such eggs are infertile and will not hatch, even if incubated.

A bird in the peak of health on an ideal diet **may** be able to sustain **some** egg production without serious harm. However, with captive pet birds, it can also become an obsession, because the eggs do not hatch and allow the full cycle to complete, thus turning off the hormonal trigger to lay eggs.

Constant egg laying will deplete your bird of vital nutrients, and predispose her to malnutrition, osteoporosis, and life-threatening health problems, such as egg binding and yolk peritonitis. While egg laying can occur in any breed, it is most common in cockatiels, lovebirds, budgies, canaries, and finches. Egg laying can start anytime from 5 months to over 10 years of age.

If you find an egg, you want to immediately correct any environmental factors that predispose your bird to lay eggs. If that does not work, your bird may require medical treatment to control egg laying, so you'll want to get her to a qualified Avian vet. There are several safe, effective hormonal treatments available, which your Avian vet can tailor to your bird's needs.

How to Discourage Egg Laying

Many factors can predispose birds to lay eggs. Following are ways to discourage egg-laying.

NOTE: Weigh your bird daily if you are monitoring egg laying. Be sure that, although you carefully regulate her food, that she is not losing weight. And, monitor her droppings daily!

Food

- **Diet: Diet should consist of foods that are not warm or soft, or high in calories and fat.**

Diet should consist of high-quality pellets (preferably organic), vegetables, and leafy greens. You can supplement with some grains, like barley, buckwheat, rye, amaranth, quinoa, millet (except wheat, white rice, and corn). Grains should be boiled for a few minutes and left to sit and soak up the water. They will still be a little crunchy and cooled when served (thus, not soft or warm).

Berries like blueberry, raspberry, and acai berry can be used as treats. Seeds and nuts should be given very sparingly and only as treats. Avoid sweet fruits like apple and grapes.

- **Foraging: Food should not appear to be plentiful and should take effort to find.**

When food is plentiful, it triggers your bird to start thinking about making babies. To minimize this, introduce your bird to foraging. Refer to our "Foraging for Health and Fun" article for tips on foraging. Use lots of bowls (at least 5 per bird) and if you cover them, have one that actually has no food in it, only toys, wooden beads, and materials.

- **Feeding Method: Food should "run out" occasionally, not always be available.**

Cut back on her foraging so that her bowls are empty of food by the time you get home for dinner. You can do this by either giving her less foraging or increasing the amount of shells and inert material in the mix. Ideally the edible food in her foraging should last until a few hours before you get home, so that she is without food for a couple of hours. Remove the bowls when you come home and feed her dinner outside of her cage.

Vegetable skewers can last the entire day. Vegetables are high nutrition, but relatively low calorie. You can chop the vegetables left on the skewer, if they are still fresh enough and/or use other vegetables to make a mix of chopped veggies for dinner. Sprinkle with pellets or dried

greens. Feed outside of cage or, if you feed inside the cage, remove all food before bed. Remove all food, including foraging bowls and skewers, from cage when she goes to bed.

Ensure that she is getting enough food; just make her have to work for it. **WEIGH DAILY.**

Environment

- **Toys: Toys should not have any relation to nesting materials.**

Use only toys made of metal, plastic, hard wood. Avoid things that are soft or that feel like nesting materials. Do not use palm shredders or raffia or fabric--and no birdie buddies.

- **Cage: Create an environment that is not nesty or dark.**

Remove anything that can be viewed as a nest box or nesting material. Put papers under the cage grid, to avoid access to paper, bedding, or potential nesting material. Remove access to dark enclosed spaces. Distract her by moving or remodeling her cage when she starts to act "nesty."

- **How to Deal with the Eggs: Find out if your bird is a deterministic egg layer.**

Following are some suggestions, however, if your bird lays an egg, you should consult your avian vet to find out whether your bird (species) is a deterministic layer or not. Identifying which type your bird is will probably determine how you want to handle the situation.

If she has already laid one or more eggs, allow her to lay a full clutch of 3-5 eggs and sit on them for 3 weeks or until she abandons them. This usually reduces the total number laid in a give time period. Removing the egg immediately will stimulate her to lay another within a few days.

If your bird lays eggs, place them in an open container, such as a small cardboard box within her cage. Line the box with pine shavings to prevent the eggs from breaking. Do not give her a nest box, as this will encourage her to continue laying eggs. Do not remove the eggs right away, as she will simply lay more to replace them. Instead, wait until she has stopped sitting on the eggs, then remove both the eggs and the container.

- **Cagemate: If your bird has a cagemate, consider separate cages.**

Allow friend birds to play together outside their cages while you are home. But consider a separate day cage. You can try letting them sleep together but be separate during the day. If necessary, have separate cages for sleep too. Remove all "birdie buddies" from the cages.

- **Lighting: Control lighting so that she does not think it's breeding season.**

Provide proper, full-spectrum lighting, as described in the handout and taught in the Avian Lighting class. See also our article on "Proper Avian Lighting." Incandescent lighting encourages egg-laying because it indicates summer and breeding time. Switch to full-spectrum lights.

Arrange her environment to simulate shorter days. Put full-spectrum lighting on a timer to go on for only about 10 hours in the middle of the day. **NEVER** use the Avian Sun bulbs that contain UV-B (unless explicitly directed by your Avian vet).

- **Sleep: Provide more quiet sleep time.**

Provide at least 12 hours of sleep. If she is still tending to lay eggs, try 13. Use a cage cover, proper lighting during the day (so that she fully wakes and is tired at bedtime), and play nature night sounds to encourage sound sleep (nature music Cds, such as Tropical Night are great).

Other Tips

- **Clip Her Wings: Discourage instinctive behavior and access to nesting sites.**

Allowing free flight can encourage egg-laying by increasing potential nest sites. Consider clipping wings and consult your Avian vet about how it will impact your particular bird.

- **Limit Petting: Do not touch your bird below the neck.**

Don't send your bird mixed signals when you pet her. Touching her underside and lower back or abdomen can trigger a hormonal response, as your bird thinks you are offering yourself as a mate. Limit petting to gently scratching the head, neck, and upper body area.