

Making Life Better

By Rosemary Low

It was 5pm and there was a knock at my door. A lady stood there looking anxious and asked me if I would take her cockatiel. She explained that her dog kept jumping up at the cage and she was frightened he would kill the bird. In those circumstances the cockatiel must have been under a lot of stress. I had no hesitation in answering “Yes”, and told her that I would try to find a good home for it.

A few minutes later she came back with a normal grey male cockatiel. It was in adult plumage but appeared to be no older than about one year. She had bought it from a pet shop four months previously. It was in very good condition but seemed ill at ease in the cage.

After she left I made a couple of telephone calls and had no trouble in placing “Joey” in a new home. Next day he went to a spacious aviary to join about 14 others of his own species. I strongly believe that an untamed bird of a flock species, like the cockatiel, should not be condemned to a lonely life. The distinction should be made between it and a tame bird that is devoted to its owner. I recall a comment made on a television programme by an employee of a pet rescue centre. He said that all birds brought in are re-homed in aviaries. He missed the point. A tame bird, used to human companionship, is likely to be just as unhappy in an aviary as that untamed cockatiel was in a cage.

The moment I set eyes on Joey’s cage I knew that his owner understood little about making a caged bird happy. The cage was much too small – suitable only for a budgerigar. There was a perch at one end at the top, the other end being occupied by a large swing that the cockatiel never used. This meant it could not jump from perch to perch. The cage contained a ladder, toys, mirror and a large piece of cuttlefish bone. There was not a lot of room for the cockatiel to move about and he preferred to cling to the bars.

Food and water containers were not an integral part of the cage so hands had to enter it to replenish them. The water container was a plastic hook-on of a violent violet

shade – the sort of colour that a sensitive bird owner would not purchase. A millet spray was hanging in front of a gravity feeder and obscuring the contents. This did not matter as it was obvious the contents would not be touched by any self-respecting cockatiel. It was a parakeet mixture that contained colourful small pellets. As the pellets were heavier than the small seeds they dropped into the accessible part of the feeder, obscuring the small seeds that the cockatiel would have eaten if he was adventurous enough to throw out the pellets. Another food container held panicum millet and this, together with the millet spray, was his sole diet.

It occurred to me that all over the country there must be thousands of budgerigars and cockatiels living in small cages like this one, furnished with alien objects made of plastic or acrylic (toys) and shiny objects (mirrors) that are of no interest to them and just get in their way. Tame birds love their toys – but they are a different story.

I applaud Joey's owner in wanting to find a new home for him and not leaving him in the spare bedroom to which he had been temporarily consigned. But I could not help wondering why she had bought Joey in the first place. As she left she spotted my Amazon parrot and asked: "Does it swear?" It is sad to see a bird owner who has no affinity with birds.

Why am I relating this story when anyone enlightened enough to buy this magazine is hardly likely to keep their bird in this way? Simply because many readers must come across pets in similar situations. I believe that they should not be afraid of gently pointing out how the quality of life of a bird could be improved with just a little thought and effort.

Joey's diet could have been improved with the addition of some chickweed and seeding grasses that were probably growing in his owner's garden or nearby. The strange seed mixture could have been replaced with a more realistic parakeet or cockatiel mixture containing a good proportion of canary seed as well as mixed millets and a proportion of other small seeds. The biggest improvement to his life, short of the aviary in which he now resides, would have been a large cage in which he could stretch his wings. It would contain twiggy apple branches, with fresh bark on which to nibble, not smooth plastic perches. The cage design would include food and

water containers and a pull-out tray on the floor to prevent the intrusive action of a hand entering the cage.

All too often, an inexpensive cage is purchased for an inexpensive bird. Second-hand cages can often be purchased for a small sum. They can be a better alternative to a new, cheap cage provided that they are thoroughly cleaned and disinfected with a viral-killing agent.