

Controlling Unwanted Egg Laying

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This is one of the most common problems faced in avian practice; the bird without a mate that begins egg-laying activity (the vast majority of which are cockatiels). Many owners are unaware that unpaired hens can lay eggs and many do not know the sex of their bird.

Birds can be stimulated to lay eggs through several means. In the wild, the photoperiod plays a role as increasing daylight and shorter nights herald spring and summer, an ideal time to raise young. However, in the home environment, birds are essentially exposed to perpetual long days, as when it darkens outside, the inside lights are turned on so that the bird cannot follow a natural cycle. Thus they could undergo an egg-laying cycle at any time of the year. Reproductive activity is prompted by the photoperiod but other cues seem to get the cycle functioning. Some other forms of stimulation appear to be involved as well. Birds are frequently seen masturbating on toys, cage accessories or on people in the household. Mirrors or favorite toys can be objects of desire for the bird. The bird can be stimulated by other birds vocalizing in the home or merely by gently petting the bird. The bird must be comfortable in its environment, relatively free from stress so that a cycle can begin. Significant changes could upset the cycle.

In the normal situation a bird will lay a clutch of eggs varying from 3-6 eggs then sit on the eggs until they hatch. On occasion, a solitary bird may lay a clutch of eggs and then sit on them as if they were fertile. This is why many people recommend leaving the eggs in the cage with the bird. However, more frequently, the bird lays one egg after another, usually ignoring the eggs that are laid. It depends upon the individual bird if the eggs should be left in the cage or taken out. If the bird clutches and sits on the eggs and does not lay anymore while she sits on them (until she tires of this) they should be left in. Conversely, removing the eggs to eliminate the stimulus usually does not work by itself. Other means must be undertaken to stop this activity.

Egg laying is dangerous for the bird as excessive egg-laying can lead to calcium depletion which could result in egg binding (dystocia), weakness, fragile bones with a great risk of fracture and even seizures. It is essential during egg-laying, desired or otherwise, that increased vitamins and especially calcium are added to the diet. If the bird is not using the cuttlebone or mineral block, it should be scraped over the food or provided with a mineral supplement in the water. If the bird is already on a balanced diet the dangers are not as severe, however most birds are on unbalanced diets so the stress of egg laying can have grave consequences.

There are varying degrees of aggressiveness in the control of egg-laying behavior. It is preferable start with the conservative measures first. If these fail then more involved steps should be taken.

Initially, it is recommended to change the photoperiod to simulate winter-long nights and short days. That means placing the bird in complete darkness for 16 hours and daylight for 8 hours. This should be done for 2 weeks. A light cover is not enough; it must be dark. Usually placing the bird in a darkened room, away from the stimulations in the household, with a cover is adequate. In addition, removal of stimulating toys and objects (mirrors, etc.) are helpful. The owner should be instructed to not physically stimulate the bird through petting. If the bird is stroked and getting especially responsive then the handling should stop. If there are other birds in the vicinity they need to be removed to prevent visual or vocal stimulation. Changing the environment or surroundings of the bird by rearranging objects in the cage or placing it in a new location to throw her off can prove useful in control. These measures will work if followed strictly. They can be instituted whenever the bird is showing sexual behavior, the owners should not wait until egg laying has begun. These measures can also calm sexually aggressive birds of either sex during their cycle.

If these measures do not work the use of hormonal therapy may be indicated. Testosterone or a synthetic testosterone to negate the effects of the female hormone and cease the egg-laying have been used in the past. It will also calm a sexually aggressive female, however, if the sex of the bird is unknown it should not be used, as it would provide more testosterone to an already testosterone-driven male. The testosterone is usually given by injection or can be added to the water. Mibolerone (Cheque Drops) has been helpful in controlling bouts of egg laying behavior but it has been described to cause oviductal enlargement on some occasions. However, due to abuses of these drugs (anabolic steroids), especially by athletes, these drugs have become difficult to obtain and if they can be formulated have become prohibitively expensive.

Medroxyprogesterone (Depo Provera) has an overall calming effect. It is effective in stopping egg-laying activity and was used extensively in quelling sexual aggression in birds of both sexes. However, there are dangerous side effects, increased water consumption, increased appetite, watery droppings, excess weight gain, lethargy and with repeated use the risk of diabetes. This drug should be used cautiously. If used periodically it can be safe but repeated, frequent use could lead to problems. Due to the serious nature of the side effects it has fallen out of favor.

A treatment protocol that has shown some promise involves the use of human chorionic gonadotropin (hcG, Pregnyl). Three doses of hcG are given, day 1, day 3 and day 7 and it seems to be effective in holding off egg laying for several months. Unfortunately the efficacy of the drug seems to diminish over time, possibly due to the development of antibodies to the hcG. Nonetheless, some avian veterinarians use hcG as a first line drug in combination with behavior modification and photoperiod control.

Long acting leuprolide acetate (Lupron), a superactive gonadotropin-releasing hormone, has been safely used to prevent egg laying in cockatiels and budgerigars. Cockatiels are injected every 14-18 days with 100 µg/kg to cease chronic egg laying; budgerigars require the same dose given every 12–14 days to achieve the same effect. Usually three injections are needed for the best effectiveness. In some instances additional injections may be required.

If all other measures fail the last resort is a salpingectomy (“hysterectomy”). It is difficult and dangerous to remove the ovary so removal of a portion of the oviduct is usually effective. The advantage is that with surgery there will be no more eggs. However, as the ovary remains the bird will still display sexual behavior and the possibility exists that ovarian cysts may develop. Also there is always a risk when surgery is performed. So the decision to undergo surgery should be weighed heavily and done only in chronic problem egg-laying.

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