

## The Complexity and Frustration of Pet Bird Feather Picking

### Types of pet bird feather picking, its causes and what you can do about it.

By Rebecca Sweat

Many veterinarians estimate that 50 percent or more of the pet birds they see engage in some type of over-preening or feather damaging behavior.

“Feather loss is one of the most complex and frustrating problems avian veterinarians see on a frequent basis,” said Jeffrey Jenkins, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Southern California. He sees between 15 and 20 birds a day and never goes a day without seeing at least two new cases of feather picking.

#### Pet Bird Species That Have Feather Damaging Behavior

Any bird can become a feather plucker, but cockatoos, cockatiels, quaker and Brotogeris parakeets, Eclectus parrots, African greys, lovebirds and parrotlets seem particularly predisposed to this behavior. All of these are species that live in large flocks in the wild. It's not unusual in Australia, for instance, to see a flock of 500 or 1,000 cockatoos hanging out together in the trees.

“The flock species use their social environment as part of their mental health, and they do everything together. If one of them gets separated from the rest of the flock, the bird becomes fearful,” explained Larry Nemetz, DVM, an exotics-only veterinarian in Southern California. In captivity, a cockatoo that feels isolated from its human “flock” will become anxious as well, and this can lead to feather picking or other behavior problems.

In contrast, a nomadic bird, such as any of the Amazon species, Pionus or large macaws aren't usually bothered as much when they're alone. In the rain forests of Central and South America, these birds usually fly in groups of just two to four birds. As pets, nomadic species seem to be less likely to pick their feathers. “It doesn't mean it's impossible for them to do it, but it's uncommon,” Nemetz said. For every one Amazon he sees that feather picks, he sees 25 cockatoos that do it.

#### Other Pet Bird Feather Destructive Behaviors

Besides plucking out their feathers, birds may also chew, bite, shred, strip, bend and over-preen them. This is done in varying degrees. A bird may only clip off the top half of its feathers and leave the bottoms, pull the entire feathers completely from their shafts, only nibble on certain feathers like the tail or the contours, or just pluck out the down and leave the top feathers. There may be only a few feathers missing in a particular spot, to every feather within reach of its beak being pulled

A related behavior that some birds do is skin mutilation. A bird might nip on a bare spot on its body, yank out a feather shaft and make the whole area bleed, or gnaw on a scab or wound. Because it causes bleeding, skin mutilation is very serious.

“Birds can slowly bleed to death with chronic mutilation even if it looks like only small amounts of blood are lost at any one time,” warned North Carolina avian veterinarian, Gregory Burkett, DVM. If a bird hits a major artery, that can be an emergency.

Washington state avian veterinarian, Cathy Johnson-Delaney, DVM, figures that one out of every 10 feather pickers also mutilates the skin. “Mutilators generally start out as feather pickers,” she said. “There may be a spot on the bird's body where it is accustomed to picking feathers, and there are no feathers there anymore and so it bites its skin instead. The bird may continually have scabs on its chest because it picks and picks and picks.”

In some cases, the mutilation may actually be a result of the feather plucking, added Julie Burge, DVM, a veterinarian in Missouri with a special interest in birds. For instance, she said. “If a bird completely removes a feather, the follicle will be open and more vulnerable to infection. There may also be pain from where the feather was pulled, just like if a woman yanked some hair from her head. The bird may begin to pick at the skin in the area in an attempt to remove the pain. This begins a vicious cycle, because the open wound hurts and itches, so the bird digs at it more and more.”

#### Pet Bird Feather Damaging Behavior Causes

What would motivate a bird to destroy its feathers or mutilate its skin? There is a seemingly endless list of reasons

why. However, most causes fall into one of three categories: physical or medical problems, environmental factors, and behavioral or psychological reasons.

Included in the list of physical causes are viral infections (such as polyomavirus and psittacine beak and feather disease), bacterial and fungal infections (Staphylococcus, Pseudomonas, Candida, Microsporum, etc.), external parasites (scaly face and leg mites, quill mites, lice, etc.), allergic hypersensitivity reactions, nutritional deficiencies, poor wing-feather trimming, trauma (split sternum or other bone fractures) and hormonal imbalances.

A bacterial, viral infection or protozoal infection (Giardia) can lead to skin lesions or malformation of the feathers, which a bird may want to pick at. Nutritional deficiencies, protozoal infections such as Giardia, allergies and fungal infections can make the skin dry and itchy. Dietary imbalances can also slow down molting cycles and cause the feathers to stay in too long and become irritating.

A bad wing-feather trim may annoy a bird and make it want to do some of its own "trimming" to try to fix what the trimmer did. Likewise, a fracture that has healed improperly can cause the bird neurologic pain and make it start picking at the area.

If a bird's hormones are surging, it may pluck its feathers when it wants to nest. This is known as brood patch plucking. "Seasonally, some birds will pluck a patch of feathers on the chest or abdominal area that is used during incubation to transfer heat to the eggs.

There can also be a behavioral component to the hormonally-induced feather plucking. "Most pet birds are intact, but they have no mate, no territory and no flock," Johnson-Delaney said. "They have anxiety from not being able to complete the instinctive breeding behaviors. They're stimulated to breed, but they're not in a situation where they can do so." These parrots take out their sexual frustrations by picking their feathers, she said.

A bird's sexual frustrations can be exacerbated if it has a "pair bonded" relationship with the owner. "A parrot can get really upset if it thinks its owner is its mate and then that person pays more attention to another person in the room," noted Southern California veterinarian, Tia Greenberg, DVM. The bird can get so jealous or feel so rejected by its human "mate" that it responds by ripping out its feathers.

Environmental causes include housing a bird in a cage that is too small, placing the wrong size or type of perches in the cage, exposure to airborne toxins (such as tobacco smoke and aerosol sprays, which may make the bird's skin itchy), low humidity (most psittacines come from extremely humid climates and are bothered by the dry air in heated homes), and lack of full-spectrum lighting or the wrong kind of lighting. "The flickering sensation from a fluorescent light in the room can be very irritating to a bird and may be enough to make it pick its feathers out of frustration," Johnson-Delaney noted.

Behavioral causes can also be a matter of the bird not having enough mental stimulation or being under too much stress. Often the parrot is simply bored and is chewing on its feathers to keep itself occupied. The bird may have never been taught how to entertain itself and not know what to do when it's home alone during the day. Or, there may be something that is going on at home that is creating stress for the bird, such as a lot of fighting among the members of the household (maybe the owners are on the brink of a divorce), or the addition of a new pet or human family member. It could also be that the owner has moved the bird's cage next to a window where it can see cats or crows outside, and that has it frightened.

Technically though, according to Jenkins, it's not the stress that causes the bird to pluck its feathers but the day it figures out how to get rid of its anxiety. "The bird may have been stressed for quite some time and then one day, while it's grooming, it pulls a feather too hard, which startles it, and then its adrenal glands fire off some epinephrine (adrenaline), and then suddenly the bird's anxiety goes away," he theorized.

"Then another day, the bird does it again and its anxiety goes away, and then the same thing happens again. Finally the bird figures out that if it pulls out a feather when it is feeling stressed, its anxiety disappears. That's the day the bird becomes a feather picker." Jenkins said the bird is looking for the epinephrine rush, and when it pulls out a feather, it's self-medicating itself. The bird is treating its anxiety with epinephrine.

In most situations, feather destructive disorders are multifactorial. A bird may start out feather picking because of a medical or management issue but continue the behavior due to a secondary reason.

"The physical problem might get resolved, but the behavior continues because the bird has discovered that every time it pulls out one of its feathers, it gets attention from its owner," said Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC a parrot behavior consultant in Pennsylvania. "The bird learns to use feather destruction as a way to manipulate the human." In her experience, Wilson

has found that the more upset the owner is about the bird destroying its feathers, the greater the odds the bird is going to do just that.

#### Stop Pet Bird Feather Damaging Behavior

But, you may ask, is it really that big of a deal if your bird is missing a few feathers? Is it something you need to try to stop?

“Yes, on both counts,” said Johnson-Delaney. “If the situation is not dealt with, the problem becomes progressively worse.” A bird that starts out just clipping the top half of a feather or two may begin yanking out whole feathers from the shaft. The bird may get such a kick out of pulling one feather out that it decides to pull out another and then more and more. Soon it may be bald.

“If your bird has a bald chest and its tail and wing feathers are missing, it can suffer some physical problems,” Johnson-Delaney said. “The bird might crash onto the floor and can split its chest wide open. It could get an infection, or there could be other complications. Just sewing these birds up and trying to get them to heal without them ripping everything out is a real challenge.” Even if a bird doesn’t fall and get injured that way, bare skin may very well be the next thing the bird bites after the feathers are gone.

“Feather destruction or mutilation is not something you should ignore,” Burkett said. If you notice any missing feathers or destruction to the skin, he recommends you take your bird to the veterinarian for a full medical workup to rule out any disease or health problems that may be causing your bird to pluck itself. If it turns out that the bird has a bacterial or fungal infection, it may be a simple matter of just treating the bird with the appropriate antibiotic or antifungal medication.

A parrot that’s been plucking due to nutritional deficiencies may just need to be switched over to a more balanced diet. It may be a simple matter of installing a humidifier to add some moisture to the room, or removing the fluorescent lights and putting in “flicker-free” light bulbs. If the bird is plucking because it is allergic to something in the air, you may need to install air filters to reduce airborne allergens. If the problem is a hormonal imbalance, an anti-hormonal drug injection can be given to reduce hormone levels; it may need to be given again every year when breeding season rolls around.

#### Alleviate Stress & Boredom

If no physical/medical or environmental problems are uncovered during the examination, your veterinarian may refer you to an avian behavior consultant to look at possible psychological causes. The behaviorist will make appropriate recommendations, depending on what is going on in your household.

“If the bird is plucking because of anxiety, the owners need to try to alleviate whatever is causing the bird stress,” suggested Michelle Karras, a bird behavior consultant in Illinois. For instance, if the bird’s cage is by the window, and a racoon’s been living in the yard lately, the bird’s cage may need to be moved to a different part of the house.

In situations where the owners are upset about circumstances in their own lives, “they need to monitor their own stress levels,” Wilson said. “When the owners are stressed, their bird’s going to pick up on that and feel anxious itself.”

For birds that are plucking because of boredom, Karras recommended giving the parrot other alternatives to occupy its time by teaching it some tricks, putting it on an exercise program or providing it with new toys.

“Parrots love to tear things up, and providing wood and rope toys that they can chew into pieces will help keep their beak busy,” Karras said. A parrot may also be entertained if you leave the television on for it during the day while you are at work, or buy it a birdie video (with footage of other parrots) to watch during the day.

Whatever may be causing your bird to pluck its feathers, don’t accidentally reward it for doing so. “Sometimes, a bird will pick its feathers, and the owner will run over to the cage and tell it ‘No! Bad bird!’ This only reinforces the behavior, because to an attention-starved bird, any attention is better than no attention,” Karras said.

#### Redirect Pet Bird Feather Picking

Karras recommended redirecting the feather direction. This means if your bird starts to chew its feathers while you are in the room, do something to get your bird’s mind on something else: snap your fingers, knock on a table or clap your hands. When the bird stops biting its feathers, tell it “Good bird” and start giving it a lot of attention.

You can also use time-outs when your bird starts feather picking. Johnson-Delaney has had a lot of success with this technique. “Whenever your bird starts picking, throw a cover over its cage, shut off the radio or the television, and walk out of the room in a huff,” she suggested. Stay out of the room for 10 minutes and then come back and ask your bird, “Are

you going to behave yourself now?" If the bird reaches down and grabs a feather, say "No!" and leave again.

"The bird figures out pretty quickly that picking feathers is not the way to get attention," Johnson-Delaney said. In order for this to work, you have to be consistent. Do this every time your bird picks a feather, and make sure every family member does the same.

In extreme cases of stress-motivated feather mutilation, your veterinarian may prescribe a psychotropic (anti-anxiety) drug. "Some birds may just need the medication for six to eight weeks, to try to break the cycle," Greenberg said.

Some birds may only need doses of anti-anxiety medications twice a day for the rest of time, other birds will only need it in certain situations, like whenever you're having a party. "The owners learn to read their birds, to know when they have anxiety," Jenkins said. "They also learn what situations the bird is going to feather pick, and they can give it the drugs ahead of time."

It may sound like you're giving your bird a lot of medication, Jenkins admitted, but he believes that "taking medicines is better than your bird having anxiety and pulling all its feathers out." If your bird is mutilating itself and bleeding, it may also need to wear a collar on a temporary basis — just until the situation is under control.

#### No Quick Fixes

How difficult of a problem is feather plucking to fix? "However long the bird's been picking, that's probably how long it's going to take to get the problem under control," Karras said. "If your bird's been picking for a year, you're probably going to have to battle it for a year. There are no instant fixes." For instance, if your bird is plucking because it's pair-bonded to you, and it's jealous of your spouse, that can take many months or even years to retrain this bird so that it learns to accept others in the household and not see you as its mate.

The truth is, not all feather destruction problems can be completely fixed. "Some feather plucking birds will be cured if they have a medical disorder that is diagnosed and properly treated, or a psychological or environmental problem that can be addressed," Burge said. "Unfortunately, in many birds, the feather picking will become a habit that is hard to break even when the initiating cause was treated."

Once a bird has gotten into a habit of plucking its feathers, it will always have a tendency to pluck. This is something you may have to deal with, to one degree or other, for the rest of the bird's life. "You can get the problem under control so that maybe the bird won't totally pluck itself bald, but it may still pick a little around its neck," Wilson said.

Together, with your avian veterinarian and perhaps a bird behavior consultant, you may be able to get a good idea of what factors are motivating your bird to pluck itself. Then you can anticipate what's happening in the bird's life or in the household that may be triggering the behavior and take appropriate measures ahead of time.

For instance, if your bird rips its feathers out every year at the Fourth of July when fireworks are going off, you may need to give your bird an anti-anxiety medication beforehand. If your bird starts plucking whenever Uncle Fred comes over, you should move the bird to a room where Uncle Fred will not be in view.

The goal is to try to minimize the damage and manage your parrot so that it doesn't cause itself harm. "Whether or not we get a bird that has perfect feathers is not really the goal," Wilson said. "As long as the bird is happy and healthy, if it's just missing a few feathers, that's something most people can live with."