

Bird Heatstroke Dangers

Can you recognize if a bird has heatstroke?

By Rebecca Sweat

Birds can experience heat stress if exposed to hot temperatures.

When birds suffer heatstroke, it's almost always a result of the owners leaving their birds in a car on a hot day while they're out running errands, according to avian veterinarian Gregory Harrison, DVM.

"They may be taking their bird to the veterinary clinic for an examination or for grooming and then decide to run another errand while they're out," Dr. Harrison said. "When they make their stop, they roll up the windows because they don't want anyone breaking into their car and stealing their parrot. Then they run into the store or the bank or wherever they're going, thinking it'll just be a couple minutes, but then they forget how long they're gone. Fifteen minutes later they come back to their car and their bird is dead or in critical condition."

Dr. Harrison practices in southern Florida, and has never seen a bird with heatstroke from simply being outdoors in the sun. "Usually outdoor birds have exposure to a breeze, or at least they can fly to get some air movement and cool themselves down," he said. "But when birds are contained within an environment like a car, the air is stagnant, they can't fly around, and there's nothing they can do to cool off." Birds have no sweat glands and therefore cannot dissipate heat by perspiring, he added.

In the early stage of heatstroke, a bird will hold its wings out from its body and pant. It may appear anxious or agitated, or have a blank stare on its face. As the condition worsens, the panting will become very heavy, and the bird will rock back and forth on the perch and have a hard time keeping its balance. Eventually the bird will fall off the perch and begin to convulse. "If the bird is allowed to convulse, the convulsion will continue to drive the temperature up — even if the bird is brought out of the sun — because the body is working so hard during the convulsion," Dr. Harrison said.

If the temperature is not brought down quickly, the bird will die or sustain permanent brain damage.

But while heatstroke (which is an actual clotting of blood vessels to the brain) is very serious, most veterinarians do not see a lot of it in their avian patients. Usually when pet birds have had too much exposure to heat or the sun, they simply suffer from heat stress, according to Dr. Harrison. A heat-stressed bird will hold out its wings and pant, but it does not go unconscious or have convulsions like it would if it was having a heatstroke.

Heat stress is still not good for pet birds, Dr. Harrison said, because like any type of chronic stress, "heat stress causes a release of chemicals in the body that can bring on bacterial or yeast infections or metabolic diseases in birds that aren't perfectly healthy." This means that a bird that is not on a good diet or is overweight, if exposed to excessively hot temperatures, could very well become sick, he said.