

Feather-Picking in Parrots

Feather-picking is a common and often frustrating problem seen in pet birds that can be managed with proper guidance. Feather-picking results in an aesthetic defect in birds, decreases the bird's ability to keep itself warm and dry, and may also lead to skin infections or more serious complications. This handout will provide some basic information on causes and treatment for feather-picking. Further information can be obtained from your veterinarian.

What is feather-picking?

Feather-picking occurs when a bird plucks out or damages its feathers. It usually progresses from feather-destructive behavior (where the bird may just chew on its feathers) to a more severe form where the bird damages its skin. Sometimes a bird will also damage the feathers and/or skin of its companion. Feather damage/plucking can occur anywhere the bird's beak can reach, but most commonly affects the breast and neck.

Why do birds pick their feathers?

Feather-picking can occur for a variety of reasons, but these all fall into two primary categories: medical and behavioral. Medical causes of feather-picking can be related to the skin and feathers, or related to stress from other illness. Medical causes of feather-picking include poor diet, exposure to toxins, infection (which may be bacterial, viral, or fungal in origin), parasites, or other diseases. Your avian veterinarian will want to perform a full physical examination and/or run laboratory tests to rule out medical causes of feather-picking. If a medical cause of feather-picking cannot be identified, the feather-picking is likely occurring due to behavioral reasons.

Behavioral causes of feather-picking may include stress from various sources, including lack of stimulation ('boredom'), sleep deprivation, and sexual frustration. Boredom may result from lack of appropriate toys, not enough foraging opportunities, or not enough interaction with other individuals (human or avian). Stressors may include other pets in the house, unwanted attention from people, loud noises, changes in weather, new people in the house getting more attention, or other environmental factors. Don't forget that stress from behavioral causes can bring about medical conditions!

How do I manage my feather-picking bird?

Diet

A balanced diet is one of the most important components of bird husbandry, and stress from malnutrition can be a cause of feather-picking. Several nutritionally complete pelleted diets are available; contact your veterinarian to determine which one is most appropriate one for your bird. Pelleted diets should be supplemented with a variety of fresh vegetables, whole grains and fruits. Seed diets are high in fat and do not provide adequate nutrition. Seeds and nuts should be used as treats and for training purposes. Your veterinarian can discuss different methods to wean your bird off of an all-seed diet and onto a pelleted diet.

Sleep

It is optimal that birds are allowed 10-12 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night. Covering the cage at night may not provide optimal rest, so a separate dark room may be required for the bird to obtain adequate rest. Birds prefer a constant sleep schedule, so timers may help ensure your bird is getting optimum sleep at the same time every night.

Bathing

The majority of parrots are native to tropical rain forests where rain showers are a daily occurrence. Misting your bird with a spray bottle is an easy way to bathe your bird. Shower perches are also available, and showering with your bird can be a fun bonding activity. Please note that shampoos or soaps are not recommended when bathing your bird, as they can be harmful. It is also important never to bathe an ill bird, as they are less able to control their body temperature and may become too cold.

Reduce stress

Try to identify things in your bird's environment that may be causing your bird stress. Did the behavior start with a particular change in the household, such as new household member/pet, new diet, or different handling? Make sure your bird is getting enough attention during the day. Avoiding stressors can make a big difference in the anxiety level of your bird.

Keep it interesting

Birds are highly intelligent and need mental stimulation during the day. Even if your bird has a seemingly adequate number of toys in its enclosure, rotating toys at least weekly will keep the toys more interesting. Keep in mind that if your bird has a particularly favored toy, removing it or moving it might also be stressful, so watch out for this source of stress. More complex toys that require closer interaction of your bird with the toy are highly recommended. Food-dispensing toys allow your bird to work at the toy for awhile in order to get the treats contained inside. Birds love to forage, so a gradual switch from free-feeding in dishes to finding their food in novel spots is great enrichment. Consult with your veterinarian to discuss the best methods to switch feeding opportunities. A television or radio left on may provide some entertainment on days when no one is home for long periods of time. If your bird is particularly attached to you or the people in the household, playing video or audio recordings of yourself or the family when you leave may be comforting to your bird. Placement by a window may also make daily life more interesting, but be careful that stressful factors (such as a hawk staring in the window) aren't outside. Using these different strategies on different days will also help mix things up. In addition, try to spend more time interacting with your bird when you are home - interaction with people is one of the best forms of entertainment for birds!

Reduce sexual frustration

This is a less common cause of feather picking, but may occur when a bird's natural inclination to mate is suppressed. Birds often see their human care-takers as part of their avian flock, and when they decide to choose a mate, it is frequently a human. When we choose to spend time with other people, this can cause much frustration for our birds. Sometimes placing a bird in a breeding flock can resolve a feather picking problem (if sexual frustration is the underlying cause). However, since other factors (including genetic predisposition) may be causing the behavior, breeding these birds is not recommended, as they may pass on this undesirable behavior to their offspring.

Medical intervention

Several prescription behavior-modifying drugs are available. These drugs are used at the discretion of your veterinarian. When using behavior-modifying drugs, it is essential that environmental and behavior modification are part of the treatment plan. Elizabethan and other collars can be used for short-term prevention of feather-picking, but are a last resort and will not address the underlying problem. These collars are usually indicated if the bird has extremely destructive behavior and is at risk for damaging its skin. Some birds can live with e-collars, but collars inhibit the bird's mobility and may hinder access to food.

Prognosis

It depends on the length of time your bird has been doing this behavior, the ability to decrease the stress and anxiety, and the severity of the picking. A reduction in severity or frequency of the behavior is considered to be successful in the treatment of feather-picking. Even if the behavior does resolve, damage to the feather follicles may be permanent. This may result in permanent feather loss or feather cyst formation (the avian equivalent to an ingrown hair). For more information on feather-picking and feather-destructive behavior, please see your veterinarian!

More information:

The Association of Avian Veterinarians, www.aav.org/birdCare

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Clinical Animal Behavior Service

www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vmth/small_animal/behavior