



FEATHER DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR

Feather picking or chewing is one of the most frustrating, complex and difficult problems faced by bird owners and avian veterinarians. Feather mutilation, even in its “mildest” forms is a serious condition, warranting prompt veterinary attention. Feather mutilation is a condition of captivity. A bird in the wild that would destroy his feathers would be doomed, as he would be unable to stay warm, might be unable to fly, would not be able to attract a mate, and would be singled out for predation. The avian species we keep as companions form complex social structures in the wild and are dependent on these for survival. Individuals with abnormal appearance or behavior are usually not welcome in the flock as their presence are more easily detected by predators. By the time a bird destroys his feathers, something is very, very wrong.

The reasons for which a bird mutilates his feathers may be divided broadly into four categories: nutritional, environmental, medical and psychological. The causes of picking behavior often fall into more than one category, and by the time the problem is addressed, the original reason for picking may no longer exist. The behavior may persist for reasons other than those for which it began, or indeed may become a reinforced habit.

No psittacine bird (parrots or hookbills, including budgies, cockatiels and lovebirds) should ever have any bald or down covered patches, no matter how heavy the molt. Common sites for picking include the inner aspect of the legs, the chest, under the wings and the wing and tail flight feathers. Sometimes feathers are pulled out and sometimes they are chewed. Depending on the species and age of the bird, the pattern of picking is sometimes a clue to its cause.

Sometimes a bird is presented to an avian veterinarian because of picking, and sometimes the problem is noted during a routine examination. The first step is to establish whether the bird is pulling out the feathers, whether they are being pulled out by another bird, or are simply not growing at all. In each instance, an extensive history of the bird and the problem must be taken. Often some possible reasons for the behavior will become apparent during questioning and discussion. When did the bird begin picking and under what conditions? Is the bird housed alone? Is picking consistent or occasional? Were there changes in the house (people, furniture, a change in routine) at the time picking began? Who is in the room when the bird picks? Where is the bird's cage? Particularly important is the response of the owners to the behavior. Any acknowledgement of the behavior will reinforce it; scolding and chastising are attention, and any attention is better than none at all.



Although it is difficult to see a loved companion causing himself pain by destroying his beautiful plumage, the behavior **must** be ignored. Punishment will merely worsen the situation; only repetitive reinforcement is a successful behavioral modification technique for psittacine birds that mutilate their feathers. The larger parrots, in particular, are sensitive to negative emotions, tones of voice and body language. So, compliment your bird on the feathers he does have, and instruct friends and family to use only positive language around him.

Management of a feather picking companion parrot begins with a discussion of his diet and home environment. Almost all of us could improve some aspect of our bird's care. Once husbandry has been addressed, we must diagnose, and treat or rule out any medical causes of the behavior. Once the home environment, nutrition and medical needs of the bird have been addressed, we can consider the psychological roots of feather destructive behavior.

FACTORS WHICH MAY INITIATE, CONTRIBUTE TO OR PERPETUATE FEATHER DESTRUCTION

DIET

Most parrots are not fed as well as they might be, and many are suffering from serious malnutrition. Nutritional problems can lead directly or indirectly to feather picking. Among the most common are calcium deficiencies, vitamin A deficiencies and obesity. Dietary allergies (such as to peanuts or artificial coloring), protein deficiency and diets high in fat can lead to feathering abnormalities. After all, if you were to eat nothing but chocolate and chips, the state of your hair and skin would reflect this. If it does not take in the appropriate nutrients, in the correct proportions, the bird's body lacks the building blocks for healthy skin and feathers. The result can be itchy skin or abnormally formed feathers, which irritate the bird and provide a stimulus for picking.

A diet high in seed is commonly fed to our companion parrots, yet few of these birds are primarily seed eaters in the wild. All seed is high in fat, low in calcium, low in vitamin A and low in protein. Sunflower seeds are in some respects the worst culprits, as they are a cheap seed and frequently form a significant part of the diet. Sunflower seeds can be addictive for many birds, and in sufficient quantities may be directly responsible for picking behavior. See our bird care sheet for more information on diet.

ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES OF FEATHER PICKING

Lack of sleep and lack of humidity are two of the commonest reasons for which birds destroy or pick their feathers. Psittacine birds need eleven to twelve hours of uninterrupted darkness, in addition to the afternoon nap. Parrots have receptors in the retina of the eye, which relay messages to the pineal gland in the brain. From there, a cascade of hormones is released, to the pituitary gland, the hypothalamus, and the thyroid gland. These hormones direct the function of all the body's organs. The trigger for hormone release is the change from light to dark, and if this change happens at irregular or inappropriate intervals, so does the release of hormones. Erratic release of hormones amounts to an



unhealthy bird, that is less able to cope with physical, nutritional or emotional stress. Feather mutilation and a variety of behavioral problems are often the result. The immune system is weakened, rendering the bird more susceptible to disease. Just like sleep deprived people, these birds are often grumpy and difficult.

Whether you cover the cage at night, or put your bird to bed in a nighttime cage, he should be in a quiet, dark room for eleven to twelve hours. He will come to look forward to bedtime, and many birds ask to be put to bed. If your bird is normally in your sitting room or kitchen, you may need to consider a second, smaller cage so that he is not kept awake by conversation or television. Poor or unnatural lighting probably contributes to picking behavior. Parrots benefit from exposure to sunlight (safely caged and with shade supplied) and particularly in the winter, from full spectrum lighting.

Lack of bathing and humidity leads to dull, dusty feathers, prematurely tatty feathers and dry skin. Some species produce a great deal of powder down, which when inhaled (by the bird or by YOU), can contribute to respiratory disease. Bathing is a natural behavior, and should be encouraged from a young age. When performed enthusiastically, it is a wonderful energy release. Ideally a bird should bath daily. This might be just a light misting, with a more thorough bath once or twice weekly. Do not spray anything on your bird's feathers, other than water. Do not apply looms, Vaseline or "picking remedies". These will likely exacerbate the problem by forcing the bird to clean them off the feathers, and may lead to further feather destructive behavior. Any greasy or oily products are difficult to remove and will destroy the insulating properties of the feathers.

Air quality is an important factor in the health of companion birds. The avian respiratory tract has evolved in conditions of perfect ventilation, and cannot cope with poor air quality. Adapted for flight, birds have a more efficient respiratory tract than do mammals, but lack our defense mechanisms against dusty or poor quality air. Birds are more sensitive to airborne toxins and their respiratory tracts once damaged, do not recover. Respiratory disease commonly contributes directly or indirectly to picking. Cigarette smoke, as well as nicotine on hands, perfumed and cleaning products in contact with the bird may contribute to picking.

MEDICAL CAUSES OF FEATHER PICKING

External parasites such as mites are seldom seen on companion birds. Beware of pet shop products, which claim to treat feather problems by killing mites; these are likely to do more harm than good, even in the few cases, which do involve mites.



Internal parasites are a common cause of picking in wild caught birds, those housed outside and in sane areas where the parasite *Giardia* is found. This is considered a particular problem in cockatiels and lovebirds. Internal parasites should be considered in any case of feather picking. Fecal or stool tests may reveal their presence.

Allergies are poorly understood in birds, but likely do contribute to feather destructive behavior. Dietary manipulation can be successful.

Longstanding metabolic or systemic disease often causes poor feathering, and sometimes picking behavior. Subclinical or undiagnosed illnesses, such as might involve the liver, kidneys, air sacs, lungs or reproductive organs are common among psittacine birds. The health of a parrot's skin and feathers may reflect an internal problem, and for this reason, blood tests, radiographs (X-rays) among other tests are frequently recommended steps in the investigation of feather picking.

Bacterial or viral infectious disease can lead to feather destructive behavior. Psittacosis (Parrot Fever or Chlamyphilosis – not the SID) is perhaps one of the most common reasons for which parrots chew or pluck their feathers. Testing and treatment are available for this disease. Polyoma virus and Psittacine Beak and Feather disease are seen less frequently, and usually manifest as abnormal feathering, rather than actual feather destructive behavior. Testing is available for these contagious and very serious diseases. Bacterial infection of the feather follicles or of the skin is seen occasionally, and rarely, tuberculosis or fungal infections can lead to feather loss or feather picking.

Toxicities are often the cause of abnormal feathers or feather picking. In extreme cases, this includes malnutrition: chocolate, sugar, alcohol, caffeine and salt can lead to picking among other behavioral and medical concerns. Lead and zinc are probably the most common of the typical “poisons”. Old or galvanized (i.e. zinc coated) cages and inappropriate toys are two common sources of heavy metals. Frequently, exposure is low grade, taking place over years. These toxicities can be confirmed by blood tests and can be treated. Moldy seed and nuts (particularly peanuts and sunflower seeds) are a common source of fungal toxins. Offer only fresh, human food quality seeds and nuts, and regularly break these open to check for mould

Tumors or cancer of the skin and the underlying tissues may cause localized picking. There is sane evidence that chronic picking or other trauma in a given location can lead to tumor formation. Birds may pick at the site of an injury or at a source of pain within the body. Just as we might pick at a scab or rub at a sore joint, so a bird might pay undue attention to a similarly affected area of his own body. In addition, parrots as prey animals, possess the instinct to try to look normal, to blend in, and this may result in excessive grooming to “pick away” the source of the pain, or in the effort to behave like a healthy, preening bird.



Cage mate aggression or dominance can manifest as one normally feathered bird and one bird with bald patches. Usually these are on the head, where the bird could not reach to pull his own feathers. Sometimes this behavior is seen when the cage is too small, or otherwise stressful and inappropriate. It may also be a hormonally affected behavior.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS WHICH CAUSE OR CONTRIBUTE TO FEATHER PICKING

A great many psychological or emotional factors may partially, and in some cases fully explain feather-picking behavior in a given bird. Some of these are believed to be rooted in forced, rushed or traumatic weaning and/or fledging. Typically these are young birds, which are insecure and lack the social skills to cope with living in a human environment as a companion bird. Although a newly acquired, weaned baby may look superficially like an adult, psittacine birds take time to mature. During the several years required for a Grey parrot, a cockatoo or a macaw to grow up under natural conditions, parent birds and older siblings instill them with confidence, teaching them how to live in a flock, how to preen, how to fly, how to find food, how to bath and how to react to new situations. In captivity, breeders and owners must teach companion psittacine birds the guidelines by which they must live, in order to be successful in our homes.

Older birds are often considered to have begun picking following a change in the environment, boredom or the onset of sexual behavior. Certainly there can be a trigger, and hormones can play a role, but the problem should not be oversimplified. In most cases, the potential for a picking or chewing problem has been present and growing, although our perception is of sudden onset. Parrots are complex animals and in truth, admirably tough, physically and mentally.

The following psychological and emotional factors can play a role in feather destructive behavior: Boredom, loneliness, lack of environmental enrichment. Parrots have evolved to spend a significant portion of their time foraging for food. This requires shredding and tearing foliage, cracking seeds and nuts, flinging fruit and traveling distances. These activities provide mental and physical stimulation in the wild, for which substitutes must be found in captivity.

Stress and environmental change: Many baby birds are hand raised in plastic containers, receiving little human or bird contact and little visual, auditory or tactile stimulation. As he matures, such a bird will be less able to cope with change in his routine, in his physical environment or in the activity around him. A bird that lacks self-confidence and life experiences is subjected to stress, which weakens him physically and psychologically. Birds who are not raised in supportive, stimulating environments, which parallel the natural situation, are more likely to display unacceptable, undesirable or even self-destructive behaviors. These may be the birds that appear to pick for no good reason. A new person in the house, someone's absence, a new soft, or a change in routine could be perceived as threats by the insecure parrot. Furthermore, parrots are highly empathetic, and like children, are extremely sensitive to stress in their environment. Unhappiness, aggression or tension



among his flock members, that is the people in his home, constitutes stress for the bird.
Lack of routine: Parrots like routine. Just as for children, predictability in life builds security and confidence. In the wild parrots rise with the sun, call and socialize with the flock, forage, nap during the hottest part of the day, and then forage again, and interact with flock and family members, before roosting for the night. In captivity, a bird needs to know when he gets up and when he goes to bed. He needs to be sure of mealtimes: a wild bird that is unable to obtain food will die. Playtimes, naps and periods of socialization with the flock, that is the people who care for him, should be well defined.

Inappropriate wing clipping and physical trauma: Chicks who do not learn to fly, often because of early, harsh wing clips, often fall, suffering keel and tail head injuries. Instinct tells these babies to practice flight and to fly from possible (real or imagined) danger. If flight results in pain from a fall, the bird is confused, frustrated and loses confidence. Wing clipping is a useful training tool, but it must be employed judiciously. If too many flight feathers are cut, the bird will be unable to balance. Wing tip injuries are often the result of a harsh clip. Feather shafts, which splinter or irritate once clipped, may also provide a stimulus to pick. Birds who are allowed to fledge, and then have gradual, careful wing clips will be more physically and psychologically confident, and are less likely to show undesirable behaviors, such as screaming, biting and feather picking, than those birds who are prevented from fledging.

Excessive or inappropriate preening: Kept in an environment, which lacks stimulation, some birds may fixate on preening as a way to pass time. Birds with injuries, such as healed broken wings, may find it difficult to preen normally, and so may over preen those areas which they can reach, or which cause them distress. Preening is a natural and necessary behavior, but without the benefit of having been taught by parent birds, our hand fed companion birds may lack grooming skills, resulting in over aggressive preening.

Reinforcement of the picking behavior and attention seeking: All bird owners know that parrots thrive on attention. Whether a parrot is insecure, or whether he simply does not get enough attention. If he pulls out a feather and hears, "No!" or "Bad boy!" he will soon learn that negative attention is better than none at all. He may see manipulation of the owners as a reward in itself: Most of us are trained by our companion birds in one way or another (usually to fetch what they throw), and typically birds who pluck for attention will either vocalize or wait until the owner is watching. Owners must work very hard at ignoring the picking behavior, first so as to avoid reinforcing the behavior and second, so as not to destroy further the bird's self-esteem, by calling attention to his less than perfect feathering.

Cage location and crowded or stressful living conditions: Sources of stress include cage mates, birds in neighboring cages, who may use subtle yet significant body language to intimidate, animals or people at a nearby window, a nearby stereo or television. It is recommended that a cage be against a wall,



or in a corner, that it not be placed against a window, that it not be within four feet of a heavy traffic area, and that too many objects, which provide excessive sensory input, not surround it. This would include electronic devices, windows, mirrors and stairways or doorways. Remember that birds see and hear in ranges outside our sensory capabilities. It is often helpful to keep me side of the cage covered. The bird's body language will let you know what makes him happy. The key is to try to see the world from the bird's perspective. Are doors opening just behind him, making him nervous? The key to security for a bird is knowing what is coming toward you. Animals who would be prey in the wild do not like surprises.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR PARROT EXHIBITS FEATHER DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR

If your bird begins to mutilate his feathers, or if he has picked for some time, see an avian veterinarian. It is unlikely that your veterinarian will be able to offer you a quick and easy solution, but he should be able to start to rule out medical, physical or environmental causes, and discuss sane psychological aspects of the behavior.

In many cases the disease, dietary imbalance, environmental or psychological problem which gives rise to a feather picker, could equally well produce a bird with another health or behavioral concern, such as biting, screaming, systemic illness or malnutrition. Whilst this article focuses on feather picking, in fact, the treatment of a feather picker and the prevention of feather picking depend on the good care required by all birds if they are to be healthy, happy and successful companions. The following points must be addressed in the case of a bird exhibiting feather destructive behavior, but in fact, they apply to all birds:

Have your bird seen by an avian veterinarian. A physical examination and a thorough medical and behavioral history are crucial. Nutrition must be reviewed. Tests to rule out the medical causes of feather picking include blood tests for infection, anemia and organ function, fecal tests for parasites, lead and zinc blood levels, Psittacosis, Polyoma virus, Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease tests, bacterial and fungal cultures, biopsies, and radiographs. Not every test is relevant to every case, and decisions must be made on an individual basis.

Bath or mist the bird daily: (introduce this carefully if it is new to your bird; nothing on the feathers, except water); plants (non-toxic) provide additional humidity, as does a fish tank (also a good source of entertainment).

Regular sleep patterns: 12 hours of good quality daylight and 12 hours of uninterrupted dark time

Air quality: no smoke, sprays, and dust (including feather dust, dust from dried feces in cage corners).



Ensure good room ventilation: don't use air fresheners – open the windows! Do not place the bird's cage next to an air vent or heater. Remember that all birds are exquisitely sensitive to aerosols and toxins.

Exposure to natural sunlight: consider an outdoor flight pen a' putting the cage outside oo fine days (supervised, and secured against escape and predators).

Review your bird's diet: What do you offer and what does he actually eat? What are the particular needs of the species? There is almost always some room for improvement.

Cage: Is the cage appropriate to the bird? Is the cage well situated? Is it clean and comfortable?

Environmental enrichment: Like humans, birds get bored. The radio or music may be left oo when you are out. A fish tank a' another bird can be company, but never get a pet for your pet; this will create many problems, and solve few, if any.

Parrots should have lots of toys, which should be rotated weekly. Different birds prefer different types of toys, but variety will keep your bird mentally and physically active:

Climbing toys: to promote athletic activity such as ladders, swings, ropes (trim away loops which may catch heads and feet), play gyms, a flight pen.

Chewing toys: those toys, which can be destroyed, are often the most interesting. They include cardboard boxes and tubes, crumpled paper, untreated non-toxic (clean) branches with bark and leaves, uncooked pasta, rawhide, doweling, wooden spoons, untreated leather and cab.

Foot and beak toys: things to hold and manipulate. Pine cones, nuts in the shell, a treat in a box, toys which hang from the perch and must be picked up (be very careful with toys oo string a' thin rope strangulation is possible), safe children's a' pet toys.

Thinking toys or puzzles: music boxes, food puzzles, children's toys (remember that what is safe for a child may not withstand a parrot's beak).

Rules: All companion parrots require guidelines if they are to live compatibly with humans. Start with "up", "down" (oo and off the hand), "no", and "ok". It may be necessary to initiate or reinforce this control away from the cage, in a neutral room, where you are the most familiar thing. Parrots will always try to be in charge, and rules establish the owner in a position of guiding authority, building the bird's confidence in his world



Communication: Wild parrots live in flocks of varying sizes. When parrots meet, they greet each other. They are in constant auditory communication with their flock mates when they are out of visual range. This is necessary for security, finding food, finding mates, chicks, and so forth. So, since your parrot perceives himself as part of your household flock, it is important to provide this social interaction. When you enter a room, acknowledge the bird, make eye contact, and say “hello”. If you have been gone for some time, make it a longer greeting, and perhaps offer a tickle, or a treat. When you leave a room, tell him that you are going, and when you will return. For instance, “I’ll be right back”, if going to another room, “Good bye, I’m going to work”, if you will be gone for some time. When such phrases are used consistently, the bird will learn to understand that although you have gone, you will return. This is crucial. Remember that a wild bird left by his flock mates, with no expectation of their return, will most likely die. This is especially true of young parrots.

Routine and interaction with people: Parrots require a certain degree of routine, predictability and reliable interaction with the rest of the flock (human or avian) in order to feel secure. When at home, try to include the bird in your routine, as much as possible. T-stands can be moved about the house. Otherwise, make sure that your bird has plenty to do in his cage, and reassure him with contact calls. Many parrots will readily learn whistles or other calls to duet or exchange with owners who are out of their visual range. Teach your bird something acceptable to both of you, and use it to communicate when out of sight. Although he should possess the confidence to cope with changes, there needs to be some predictability in your bird’s life. He should never worry that he won’t be fed, or that he has been abandoned. He needs to know when he gets up in the morning, when he goes to bed, when he eats and when he spends time with you. Try to interact with the bird on three levels every day. First, use contact calls to communicate throughout the day when the bird may be in his cage or you may be in another room. Second, spend time with the bird, perhaps as you read or watch television, when although he is with you, there is little direct interaction. He might be on a perch or on your knee. Finally, there must be time every day when the bird receives your undivided attention. This time should include training, playing, preening and being affectionate. Birds who can depend on receiving attention are less likely to exhibit undesirable behaviors.

Is yours the right home for a parrot? Parrots are demanding, messy, difficult creatures, who require a considerable time and energy commitment from the caregiver if they are to thrive. Not every individual can provide a suitable home for a parrot, and in some cases the fairest decision is to find another home. That said, if insecurity is a part of the feather destructive behavior (and it almost inevitably is), either as a cause or effect, moving to a new home may well be perceived as abandonment, and will compound the problem.



A tragically high number of birds are given away, sold, put in breeding programs, euthanized or simply abandoned in their cages, having been labeled “psychological pickers”, “neurotic”, “sexually frustrated” or “too stupid to stop”. These intelligent, sensitive creatures are far more complex than these labels. Many, if not most, start picking for me of the environmental, nutritional or medical reasons discussed above, particularly the smaller psittacine birds, such as lovebirds, budgies and cockatiels. However, once they have begun to pick, all parrots, especially the medium and large parrots, have develop a psychological problem. No bird mutilates his feathers happily. In the wild such a bird would not find a mate; he would not be accepted by the rest of the flock. He would not be able to control his body temperature, he would be more susceptible to disease, less able to forage for food, at a disadvantage in flight and more vulnerable to predation. Feather picking is a disease of captivity and it is always significant.