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How to Manage Feather Picking Introduction

One of the most frustrating and disconcerting conditions of caged birds is feather picking. Moreover, feather disorders rank as some of the most difficult and challenging conditions to diagnose and treat in avian veterinary practice. Bird owners frequently scrutinize their pets, and feather problems are usually readily detected. Other clinical conditions of caged birds are much less obvious and are, therefore, less frequently detected.

Most people purchase or otherwise acquire a pet bird because of their physical attraction to the bird, its general appearance, feather color(s), vocal abilities or its personality. Most bird owners prefer feather perfection. When a bird begins to pick at, pull out or mutilate its feathers, its physical appearance and overall attractiveness are greatly diminished, causing great consternation on the part of its owner. Some of the bird owner's frustration results from a lack of understanding of what motivates the bird to behave in this destructive manner and what can be done to stop the behavior.

Feathers and Preening

Feathers have a variety of functions: flight, temperature regulation, protection against environmental and climatic extremes, and courtship displays (colorful feathers, selective erection of certain feathers, etc.). Without feathers, wild birds could not survive. Therefore, careful and regular attention to the feathers and their condition is vital. The process by which a bird grooms itself is called preening. It will use its beak to condition and waterproof its feathers and to meticulously remove the sheaths through which all new contour and flight feathers emerge. Birds use their feet and claws to perform this latter function on contour feathers located on the head. It is not uncommon for birds to rub against objects in their immediate environment to perform this function. Mutual preening is common among cage mates. Normal preening behavior must be distinguished from feather picking and mutilation.

What is Feather Picking?

Feather picking is an obsessive, destructive behavior pattern of birds during which all or part of their feathers are methodically pulled out, amputated, frayed, or in some other way damaged. This behavior often prevents normal feather growth and emergence.

Molting is the normal physiologic process by which old, worn feathers are lost and subsequently replaced by new ones. The frequency of this event varies with the species and the individual as well as with climatic and geographic factors. In warm areas, most caged birds drop a small number of feathers intermittently throughout the year and have 1-2 heavy molts each year. The process of molting must be distinguished from feather picking.

Feather picking is not difficult to diagnose. Affected birds look very much the same. Regardless of the pattern of feather loss, damage of mutilation, and exposed bare skin below the neck, the head feathers are spared and always appear perfect and untouched. This is, of course, because the bird cannot reach its head feathers. The one notable exception to this is the bird whose feathers are picked by a cage mate. As mentioned, birds caged together often engage in mutual preening. This behavior can become obsessive and destructive, resulting in feather picking. In these cases the head feathers of the victim are not spared.

Causes of Feather Picking

There are both medical and non-medical causes for feather picking. The major medical causes include changes in hormone levels, external and internal parasites, malnutrition, internal disease, and bacterial or fungal infections of the skin and/or feather follicles. Interestingly, and contrary to popular opinion, external parasites (mites in particular) are extremely rare among caged birds. The non-medical causes are psychologic and/or stress related.

Feather picking is generally a problem of birds in captivity. Wild birds do not feather pick because they are too preoccupied with their own survival and with reproduction. Captive birds (pet birds and those in zoos and avicultural collections) endure stress not experienced by their wild counterparts. Captivity, malnutrition, solitary living, absence of a mate with which to fulfill courtship rituals and mating needs cause significant stress, in addition to stress associated with confinement within a home (noise, confusion, presence of other pets, such as dogs or cats, which represent potential predators to caged birds).

Like people, birds are creatures of habit, and changes (large or small) in their environment or in their established routine can often create stress for the individual. This stress often results in obsessive, introverted behavior, manifested by feather picking.

It is helpful to understand that feather picking represents one extreme of the feather care and maintenance continuum (see diagram on the next page).

In the middle of this continuum is normal feather care and maintenance, represented by normal preening. To the left is the complete absence of feather care and maintenance, most commonly seen with domestic, hand-raised birds. These baby birds fail to learn proper preening (technique and frequency) from their parents. To the right of the middle is overzealous preening or outright damage to, or destruction of, the plumage represented by feather picking.

Bird behavior tends to be patterned and ritualized. With this fact and the feather care and maintenance continuum, in mind, it should not be too difficult to appreciate why captive birds, experiencing multiple stresses day after day, continuously pick at their feathers. There is little difference between drawing a feather through the beak to condition it (preening) and doing the same thing but clamping down on the feather midway through the process and cutting it in half or pulling it out (feather picking).

Most caged birds seem prone to feather picking. The groups of birds most notorious for engaging in this vice include African gray and Timneh parrots, cockatoos, macaws, conures, gray-cheeked parakeets, and cockatiels. Interestingly, we rarely see feather picking budgies or Amazon parrots.

We do, however, see a self-mutilation syndrome in Amazon parrots and occasionally in other species (African gray parrots, macaws). This may represent the way in which some of these birds cope with or manifest stress. Others believe that the condition is an infectious disease, possibly of viral origin. It is not uncommon for afflicted birds to mutilate their skin (toes, wing webs, groin and armpit areas). This constant and continual trauma results in infection and failure of these wounded areas to heal. These birds must be prevented from engaging in this self-trauma through use of collars, bandages, etc. They also must be treated aggressively with systemic antibiotics (injections are preferable).

Treating and Preventing Feather Picking

From the above discussion it should be obvious that there are no quick and/or easy solutions for psychological or stress-induced feather picking. Collars fashioned from discarded x-ray film or certain acrylics can be fitted and applied. These materials create an artificial barrier between the bird's beak and its feathers. Collars treat the symptoms (the feather picking and mutilation) but do not eliminate the underlying cause(s). In fact, collars themselves can be very stressful to caged birds and should only be applied when it is necessary to arrest self-mutilation and prevent hemorrhage, or as a last resort when all else fails. Furthermore, collars create problems of their own. Besides causing great stress to the bird, they also prevent normal feather maintenance (preening).

If medical causes for feather picking have been ruled out, and boredom (solitary confinement) is regarded as the major cause of feather picking, then you as the bird owner must be prepared to make changes. Increasing the amount of time you spend with your bird will greatly reduce feather picking tendencies because the bird is kept otherwise engaged.

Sometimes changing the location of the bird's cage and/or perch is helpful. The suitability of the new location will depend upon the temperament of the bird and the relative unsuitability of the previous location. For example, a feather picking African gray parrot (*normally shy and suspicious) might be better off in a more private and secluded area of the house than in a heavily trafficked and noisy locale. By contrast, an umbrella cockatoo (docile, affectionate, gregarious) that lives in relative isolation and that has begun to feather pick might be better off in a very public area of the house. If a feather picker lives in a very small cage or has limited living space, it might be beneficial to provide a larger cage or a more spacious living environment.

Some feather pickers may not receive adequate rest. Providing these birds with a more quiet and secluded locale and covering the cage at night may be helpful. The latter is most important because it provides a certain period each day or night during which absolute privacy and freedom from a fish-bowl existence is assured.

Bathing or misting a feather picker on a daily or otherwise regular basis may be beneficial because wetting the feathers encourages normal preening behavior. The hope is that the bird will spend more time conditioning the plumage and less time chewing on the feathers or pulling them out.

Boredom and resultant feather picking may be combatted by providing a wide variety of foods. Emphasis should be placed on foods that require some time and effort to eat (non-shelled walnuts and other nuts, string beans, snow peas, macaroni and cheese) and those representing a variety of colors, shapes, sizes and textures. This recreational feeding keeps the bird stimulated and interested in the food, increases the amount of time required to eat, and decreases the amount of free time that could be spent feather picking.

The same factors should be considered when providing toys with which a caged bird can play. The widest variety and assortment possible should be offered. The toys (chains, bells, rawhide and hardwood pieces, mirrors, hard rubber toys) should be durable and appropriate for the size and type of bird being considered. Toys should stimulate and hold the bird's interest as much as possible. It is important to provide natural objects that a bird can investigate, chew up, and rip apart. Branches from non-toxic trees, with leaves (eucalyptus) and large pine cones, can be offered to satisfy these destructive tendencies. These objects should be clean and free of insecticide and herbicide residues. It is equally important to provide objects that can fully involve the bird in actual physical exercise (large ropes to climb on, large paper bags, and cardboard boxes with holes). Appliances (radio, tape recorder, television, etc.) that stimulate the bird's other senses should also be considered and provided whenever possible. A feather picker whose attention is diverted and held by these types of toys and diversions will spend less time pursuing its vice.

Feather Picking and Sexuality

Much feather picking of caged birds results from sexual isolation and frustration. It is easy for most bird owners to subconsciously ignore the sexuality of their pet bird because, in most cases, the true gender of their bird may not be known. Caged birds do not have external genitalia or other physical characteristics that would, at a glance, indicate their sexual identity. They do, however, have gonads (testes or a single ovary) located inside their bodies. These organs produce the very same sex hormones (testosterone, estrogens) that our own gonads produce. These sex hormones are extremely potent and can change a bird's behavior.

In the wild, these behavioral changes would result in the selection of a mate and the pursuit of courtship and mating behaviors. Unfortunately, in the home, solitary pet birds are rarely free to engage in these pursuits. The frustration that often follows can result in feather picking. Some investigators believe that hormone-influenced (sexual) feather picking is the result of a bird's attempt to create a brood patch. This completely featherless area of the breast allows very efficient transfer of heat from the bird's body to the egg(s) it is incubating. In captivity and nonbreeding situations, the feather picking and pulling is, of course, nonproductive and becomes an obsessive vice, even when hormone levels wane. Some of these birds exhibit a favorable response to progesterone drugs in the early stages.

Providing an appropriate mate is obvious, but not always practical. Reducing sexual stimulation (removing mirrors and masturbatory toys, placing birds of opposite sex that are caged separately out of sound range from each other) may be helpful.

In multiple-bird households, feather picking may result when a bird is housed near other birds. Under these circumstances, moving this individual out of sight and beyond hearing from the

others may reduce the level of stress experienced by the bird and the severity of its feather picking.

Popular Remedies May Not Work

There are certain popular remedies for feather picking. Foul-tasting sprays applied to the feathers (Bitter Apple, Listerine, etc.), grinding/notching of the lower beak to make destruction of the feathers more difficult, and use of tranquilizers have all been recommended over the years to treat the chronic feather picker. Unfortunately, none of these is truly effective. They merely treat the symptom (feather picking) but do not treat the causes of feather picking. Under certain circumstances, however, some of these remedies may provide some help or relief.

One suggestion that should be given serious consideration is not clipping the wings of birds that mutilate their feathers, especially the flight feathers. The rationale for this recommendation is that feather-picking birds need no excuse to be destructive to their feathers; this procedure usually provides one. Though wing-trimming is not disfiguring, it does involve trimming of the largest and longest of the bird's feathers. Feather pickers or birds prone to this vice soon discover these altered feathers and begin to methodically and obsessively chew and split that part of the quill that remains of the clipped feathers. The result of this mutilation is a series of frayed feather quills that rarely drop out during the next molt and tend to be retained indefinitely.

If you elect not to clip your bird's wings because of this consideration, you must be willing to accept the liabilities of a fully flighted bird in the home. Make the decision carefully.

In cases of chronic feather picking, close scrutiny of the bird and its interactions with its environment can help establish a program of behavioral modification. A qualified avian behaviorist should be enlisted if this remedy is to be pursued. Behavioral modification may be of tremendous value in reducing stress, treating stress-induced problems of caged birds, and treating obnoxious behavioral problems.

Some cases of severe chronic feather picking may not respond to any kind of treatment. Damage to or destruction of the feather follicles from repeated trauma to the skin may result in permanent feather loss or growth of abnormal feathers. These pet birds also tend to be unmanageable and very difficult to handle. Placing these birds in a breeding or avicultural situation may be the most practical alternative. Unfortunately, this is never an easy decision for a devoted bird owner.