

FEATHER PLUCKING

Feather plucking in birds is a very common condition with many causes. It is a challenging syndrome to diagnose and treat in practice and requires a systematic and thorough investigation. Broadly speaking feather picking birds are grouped into two main categories:

- **Psychological feather plucking** – caused by psychological issues such as stress, boredom or behavioural issues. This is the least common cause of feather plucking. The vast majority of birds who display feather destructive behaviour have an underlying health problem.
- **Disease related feather plucking** – The most common type and potentially caused by a myriad of diseases from malnutrition, liver or kidney disease, tumours, psittacosis, viral or bacterial diseases, painful conditions, atherosclerosis, fungal infections, toxins, reproductive disease, allergic disease, parasitic disease etc.

Very commonly feather plucking is caused by multiple factors, all of which need to be addressed in order to see an improvement.

Some birds with this problem do not actually remove the feathers completely. They nibble at or damage the feathers leaving them with a tattered and ragged looking appearance. The most severe cases actually damage the muscle tissue underneath the feathers causing severe self trauma and bleeding. These cases should be presented to an avian vet as a matter of urgency.

Many birds are presented at quite a chronic stage of feather plucking – often months or years after the initiation of the problem. This can be either because owners mistakenly believe the bird is moulting (in the initial stages) or after having tried various remedies such as mite treatments or pet store sprays in the mistaken belief that external parasites are the cause of the problem. It is important to note that normal moulting will never result in bald patches appearing on a bird.

It is vital to understand that there is no diagnostic magic wand and often a slow and considered approach is necessary. For many of these birds who have been plucking for months a 'quick fix' is neither realistic nor possible.

There are many ways to begin such a diagnostic work up but as a general rule we would recommend the following:

- **A consultation and full clinical examination with one of our avian vets** – this will allow us to take a detailed history of the problem and allow us to discuss with you a logical diagnostic approach to further investigations.
- **A blood test for biochemistry and haematology** – this will give an overview of your bird's health. It will show if there are any obvious liver or kidney problems, calcium deficiency or signs of infection which can either depress the white blood cell count (Such as Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease) or elevate the white blood cell count (Psittacosis for example). The blood sample is taken under a brief anaesthetic and sent to an external laboratory. Separate tests for chlamydia (psittacosis) or circovirus (Pbfd) may also be recommended.
- **X-rays** should also be taken under anaesthesia and can be useful to look for changes to organ size (eg liver enlargement), evidence of metal in the gastrointestinal system (which may mean zinc or lead toxicities) or arthritis (which can cause pain). They can also be used to look for evidence of proventricular dilatation or internal tumours.
- **Endoscopy** (inserting a small camera into the body) can also be very helpful in evaluating the internal organs, in particular to rule out respiratory disease which may affect the lungs and air sacs. Biopsies may also be taken via endoscopy if necessary.

In addition to these investigations it is also very important to address husbandry factors which can be a direct cause of malnutrition, reproductive or hormonal issues and general poor health.

Diet: Many of these birds are on seed based diets which can be very detrimental. Such diets lead to increased fat intake which can trigger hormonal problems while at the same time being very deficient in vital minerals such as calcium and vitamin A. Even with some fruit and vegetable additions **seed is not a good diet for a bird**. Changing these birds onto a balanced, pelleted diet supplemented with fruit and vegetables is an important step in improving their general health and immune system.

Environmental Enrichment - it is vital that a full diagnostic investigation is undertaken before assuming a feather picking bird's problem is just stress or boredom, however it is important to remember a significant number of these bird's problems can be ameliorated if not cured if they are given a more interesting way to spend their time. In the wild, birds spend a significant part of their day foraging for food.

This can be emulated in some ways in captivity to avoid boredom. You need to set your bird a challenge that is easy to begin with such as just putting a piece of paper over the top of the food bowl. Once they have mastered this you can make it a bit more difficult – wrap favourite food items partially in paper then move them to different places for more of a challenge. Place items inside cardboard toilet paper inserts or boxes. Once your bird has mastered this, you can increase the degree of difficulty by buying toys that you can hide things in. It is important not to make things too difficult to begin with or your bird will become discouraged and give up.

UV Light: Unlike humans, birds see into the UV spectrum. Many of the feather colours and patterns that signify a bird as a male or a female to its flock members are only visible in full spectrum light (unlike the light we have in our homes which contains no UV). In addition to sex identification certain fruits and berries have different colours in the UV spectrum which help a bird tell if they are edible or ripe. Birds (especially Grey parrots) require UV light to convert vitamin D precursors in their skin allowing normal calcium absorption to take place.

Sunlight will contain no UV if it is shining through a window as the glass does not permit passage of the UV part of the spectrum. We recommend the provision of a bird UV light with 12% UV-A and 2.4% UV-B. Timers can be used to ensure the light goes on 1 hour after sunrise and turns off 1 hour before sunset. Usually approximately 10-12 hours of light per day. Clamps can be used to attach these lights to the top of the cage and reflectors to better concentrate the beam in the bird's direction. Make sure your parrot cannot chew on the wires! These globes must be changed every 6 months – although they will still emit light that we can see, the UV component wanes to negligible levels after 6-12 months.

It is very important to restrict your bird to no more than 12 hours of light a day. You can either move your bird to a quiet, dark room or cover the bird's cage with a blanket to cut out light exposure. Excessive light can disrupt sleep patterns and cause hormonal changes connected with reproduction leading to frustration based feather plucking.

Bathing or spraying: encourage your bird to preen normally by gently misting once or twice daily with warm water. Many birds also enjoy a bath.

Environmental toxins: do not allow smoking around the bird or the use of incense, plug in air fresheners or other irritants. The fumes from overheated Teflon pans can be fatal to birds.

Diagnostic tests, environmental management and potential treatments all take time so it is important to be committed to the process. Even with the most dedicated management and appropriate investigations many of these cases can only be managed – not cured.