

Behaviour issues:

Once a picker always a picker?

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There is a widespread belief that parrots that are chronic pickers and/or mutilators cannot be rehabilitated. My experience the past 11 years demonstrates otherwise. I offer two case studies to demonstrate this.

Case One

Corky is a 12-year-old female Moluccan Cockatoo and still the worst-case picker/mutilator that her avian veterinarian has ever seen. Corky was hatched in captivity and hand-raised. She lived with a wonderful family who made sure she had the best cage, diet, toys and whatever else she wanted or needed. Nonetheless she started mutilating at approximately 9 months old.

Early one morning after Corky had been in her new home for approximately 6 months her family woke to find her in her cage soaked and completely covered in blood. Not knowing what was wrong they immediately wrapped her in a towel and called her avian veterinarian's emergency number. They lived about an hour's drive to the animal hospital but they got there as quickly as they could. The vet was waiting. Corky was alert

but quiet. She had chewed over half of the skin off one leg and put a huge gash in her chest that was very deep. She was stable so the vet put her under anaesthesia and immediately starting cleaning and stitching her up. They also ran a complete blood work up to make sure that there was nothing medically wrong. Corky's lab work came back normal and she was able to go home after two nights in the hospital, but she had to wear an e-collar and was

wrapped up like a mummy in gauze. Her vet actually made a full gauze slip on shirt so she could not get to her sutures or her skin. Her family tried to figure out what could have happened that night that set Corky off. Nothing had changed in the environment. Her cage and toys were the same, her family's schedule had not changed and diet was still very good. Corky had always been a great eater. They were heart broken that maybe they had done something wrong.

Corky spent the next two months healing and she did that beautifully. Her personality and high level of animation returned and she seemed happy. She was completely healed; the stitches and the e-collar were removed. Approximately two months later her family woke to the same horrible sight but this time it was much worse. This time the hole in her chest was much deeper and she had gotten at

both legs. There was barely enough skin to stitch the wounds together. Not only was the family heartbroken but also they were confused why and how this could happen to their beautiful baby bird. Corky did not seem as alert as the last time so she was hospitalised for a longer period of time. After being sutured up and collared again, Corky was ready to go home after a week in the hospital. Unfortunately her family was afraid to take her home. They still blamed themselves for this unique behaviour and did not want to put her through that again. They really felt it was they or their home that made Corky do this.

So many times it seems easy to pin point why birds will do this to themselves, lack of enrichment, poor diet, too small a cage, bad wing clipping, not enough sleep, stress in the home, infection or other medical problems. Sometimes the problem is obvious but in Corky's case she seemed to have received everything possible for a bird in captivity. Corky's family loved her very much and did not want to give up on her but they were afraid to take her home. The veterinarian suggested a foster home close to the hospital while Corky was healing so she came home with me. She fitted in my home immediately and the healing began. Her family came to visit over the next three months but the visits got fewer and further in between. Finally they decided that they could not bear the fact that she might do this again, therefore I adopted her permanently.

Corky has been with me for the past 10 years and has healed completely. She has not picked or mutilated at all during that time. Even in the last four years feather have grown in on her



Corky Original.



Corky After.



Another feather picker - Pretty Original.

legs where it appeared she had a lot of follicle damage. Corky is still very animated and is living happily with no reoccurrence of picking or mutilating. In the case of Corky I believe her healing was due to an environmental change.

Case Two

Lilly is an approximately 8-year-old female Umbrella Cockatoo. She arrived at the animal hospital, poorly collared, with a wardrobe of dresses made from colourful cotton she was to wear to keep her from picking her feathers. Also she was being treated with Prozac. Her family had given up on her and she did not have a good future. She had completely picked her chest and leg feathers out and had made about an inch and half cut across her chest. Another veterinarian had stitched Lilly up and it just did not look right. Still, it was time for the stitches to come out. Lilly was taken off of the Prozac and moved into my home during the healing process. She seemed happy and settled in quickly. Her new avian veterinarian had done a complete blood work up and physical examination and she was in good health. She immediately started eating a wonderful diet and her feathers started growing in. She appeared to be very happy. One morning after being with me for



Pretty After.

about one month I woke her up to find blood on her chest and rash like open sores. The sores looked like she had been excoriating them all night. I took her to the animal hospital to see what the problem was and we realized her feathers were in grown on that area of her chest. It was the area that had been sutured. When the first veterinarian stitched her up he did in fact fold the skin under instead of debriding it and suturing it together, which did not allow the feathers to grow in normally. Her vet put her in an e-collar and I brought her home. I hot packed and massaged her chest daily to facilitate regrowth of feathers. Once they had all regrown and did not irritate her anymore the collar was removed. She has been with me for four years and has not picked at all.

I have had the opportunity to work with many picking and mutilating birds over the past 11 years. 10 Moluccan Cockatoos, 6 Umbrella Cockatoos, 1 Ducorps Cockatoo, 2 Goffins Cockatoos, 3 Blue and Gold Macaws, 1 Hyacinth Macaw and 1 Green-wing Macaw. Only one Moluccan started picking again, a success rate of 96%. Some are in my home, others are living with wonderful well-educated families. Some were found to have medical problems, which were treated,

and others just seem to need some understanding. We must remember that they are birds and have special needs, and that it is up to us to do everything possible for them while they are sharing their lives in captivity with us. But once a picker doesn't mean always a picker!

Helpful Tips

After any medical problems have been ruled out by your avian veterinarian the following are some basic changes and additions that I have had success with and which can be easily implemented into your birds daily routine.

1. I do not clip wings on birds that are picking. They appear to have more confidence when they have their wings, whether they fly or not. I do not recommend that the wings be allowed to grow in if the lifestyle in the home is not conducive to this. There is always a risk to having a full flighted bird indoors or out. There are some cases where it appears a poor wing clip was the cause for shredding and picking.
2. Make sure your bird is getting enough dark quiet sleep. This is about 10 to 12 hours of quality sleep every night. So many times our birds share our living space but they can't get the rest they need if they

are subjected to the TV or family conversation until midnight and then are awakened early in the morning. Sleep cages in another room are great for this and the bird is still able to be part of the family.

3. Be sure your bird is eating the good foods they are fed. It is up to us to observe and make sure they are eating what they need as well as what they want. I find nuts in the shell are a great addition to a pickers diet. This not only gives them a project to occupy them but a food treat they usually like. Flax seed oil is a great source of essential fatty acids, which many birds are lacking. Mix a couple of drops in the fresh foods that the bird is eating. This is another easy way to make sure their diet is more complete.

- 4 So many pickers are not bathed often enough or at all, soaking showers and baths are very important a minimum 3 times a week.

- 5 Enrichment is also lacking in so many cases of feather picking. A study from C.L.Meehan, J.A. Mench and J.P.Garner, Department of Animal Science U.C. Davis states: "Our enrichment protocol effectively modified fearfulness and effectively prevented the development of abnormal behaviours. It also reduced the performance of established abnormal behaviours." We need to observe and make sure that our birds are enjoying the toys and projects in their area. They need all kinds of different projects to work on. Toy boxes can be easily made from a shoebox; these can be filled with left over toy parts, other boxes, nuts, treats, etc. Most cockatoos will spend hours destroying their toy box. One of the most effective toys I have found for pickers is simply tying together other bird's feathers. This gives them a colourful object that they can preen. We sometimes forget that our birds are left in their cages for long periods of time and it is up to us to make sure they are able to stay busy. 