

Dealing with Feather Picking *EB Cravens*

I have to admit it, after all these years. I have never written an article about feather plucking in psittacines. Oh, I have counseled people about feather picking parrots, adopted and rehabilitated feather picking parrots, read about and studied other owners' feather picking parrots, and, of course, lived with/anguished over feather plucking parrots during my many years in birdkeeping. But up until now, I have not sat myself down at the typewriting keyboard to give any assessments or conclusions on this baffling and controversial avian problem...

There are oh, so many, reasons that captive birds initially begin over-preening or mutilating their plumage. It can happen with elderly birds from an accumulation of less-than-perfect diet or care over the years; it can also occur in young handfed pet birds less than one year into their new life. Causes can be physical, emotional, environmental or a combination of same. In an article such as this it is necessary to generalize somewhat, but our recommendations to deal with feather picking are as follows:

- 1) Get a veterinary check up to ascertain if any health problems could be associated with the feather destruction. Worms, giardia, allergies, lack of humidity, or vitamin/mineral deficiencies are just a few of the potential links.
- 2) Institute immediate changes in the parrot's cage environment to stimulate mental response and interest. These may include light, space, location, new food dishes, greenery, toys and fun perching choices.
- 3) Equivalent changes in foods offered to make eating a longer, more challenging and interesting activity.
- 4) Daily spray baths to encourage preening and new feather growth for warmth. Utilize care where cool temperatures are involved. Use soothing holistic additive to spray bottle such as aloe, vitamin E, or extracts of burdock root, marigold, goldenseal.
- 5) Increase the amount of handling for pet birds; full body massage of pet birds. For breeding birds, reduce stress by limiting vision of humans and raising cage heights significantly.
- 6) Allow full flight feathers to grow in on any clipped parrot; reflodge the bird to teach it landing skills and airborne confidence if it was never properly fledged. (One exception is a parrot that has been clipped on one wing only: it should be slightly trimmed on the other wing, and two flight feathers at a time can be pulled by a vet from the clipped wing in order to bring flapping balance back to the bird as soon as possible.) Increase exercise.
- 7) Introduction of a simple open-ended nesting box or hollow log for play.
- 8) Serious consideration of a companion bird for some species of mature single parrots.

If I had to offer one universal factor which can add to the causes of a feather picking syndrome, I would suggest boredom. At the root of their existences in captivity, so many intelligent parrots are living in habitats that do not test their mental acumen—habitats that do not change. One of our cases in point:

Zoe, a handfed Rosebreasted Cockatoo adored by her new family, was only a few weeks beyond one year of age when she began to “shave” some of the colored feathers on her breast and legs. Her human family was distraught. They ran vet tests and tried new things and matters only got worse. Three months later they called me about adopting Zoe, since she was still so young and obviously not doing well. I agreed to try and rehab her.

The next week, Zoe arrived by airplane. I gave her a new cage off a window in the guesthouse out in the woods where she could watch everything going on during her quarantine period. Her diet was changed from dry pellets to soaked and cooked grains and sprouts and tiny parakeet/canary seeds in the afternoon. She got moderate amounts of attention, but mostly was able to take in the fresh air and sunshine and watch the wild birds and us.

After quarantine she was moved to her own aviary where Zoe discovered the ground for the first time. Literally overnight she changed. She would spend hours browsing and investigating and sampling tiny grass seeds and weeds and clay and bark and the like. She would wander around the aviary so engrossed in her new lifestyle, that when humans came around, she did not even beg for attention and to be picked up and petted. Within six weeks her plumage was back to immaculate.

Zoe is not the first plucking parrot we have helped to kick the habit. Several unhappy eclectus parrots with serious feather mutilation have been cured here with the move to a natural lifestyle and a raw/green/soft food diet. One yellow front amazon we took in with serious self-mutilation of its wings down to nubs began growing new bloodfeathers within days of being taken off a dry diet and given sunlight and greenery in an intriguing new environment.

The most important thing we have found with psittacines entering in to feather picking difficulties is to immediately break the sameness in their daily routine. This can be done in many imaginative ways. It is most necessary in order to stop the cycle and prepare the bird for stopping the habit.

As such, all techniques that might be considered potential problem causers (such as giving a cardboard play box, or spoiling the parrot with attentions) take precedence over precautions. We feel that feather problems must be halted now—side effects can be coped with once the bird is back to health and happiness.

Fresh interesting chewing materials are a must. For birds that like tiny chewable, tree or flower buds, millet spray treats, and safe cloth to fray are desirable. Green branches not only provide diversion, but offer mineral supplement. We have even used them in nesting boxes where hens have a habit of picking at the feathers of offspring.

For parrots such as African Greys that have begun chewing wing feathers, a toy made of same size primaries bound into a “cluster” and hung near their favorite perching spot can be helpful to stop self-chewing. Piles of crumpled brown paper have been known to divert Senegal pets from destroying their own feathers.

Get your bird outside safe in a play cage with you around or take him for walks in a carry cage or harness to take his mind off of plucking. If a parrot has picked so badly that it is in danger of falling, then the area under its perches should be soft padded to decrease danger and fear.

Increase the mineral calcium in his diet--best is a soluble health food calcium mineral supplement in liquid form. If the bird lives indoors, vitamin D supplementation is a good idea. For parrots with bare

skin patches from plucking, raw aloe vera plant gel rubbed on the skin will soothe irritation and fight any bacterium. Vitamin E squeezed gently from 200 IU capsules and spread on skin or wing follicles will encourage new feather shaft growth. Sometimes it has taken us several months before injured follicles respond.

We also offer more oil in the diet from fish, palm, olive or flaxseed, and increase immune system integrity with spirulina or wheatgrass powder. In winter, dry home environments need to be moisturized.

Find out when in the day your hookbill plucks--or is it at night--clean sheets under him will collect feathers so you can tell. Is he pulling all quills or just biting them off? Does he eat them for nutrition, chew them up for fun, or just throw them down?

If you are fortunate, a major natural life change will stop the picking promptly, especially in the case of boredom; but still plan on three months to make real progress. Just growing the new feathers can be added metabolic stress.

Start a record book noting day by day observations so you can compare data.

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