

Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by
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All Pets Medical Center, West Hills, CA

Question #1: What is the best way to handle blood feathers that are bleeding in pet birds? I assume that in the jungle it just stops and does OK.

T. Saur, California

ANSWER#1: In my experience, most blood feather trauma is related to an inappropriate wing clip. The best way to deal with the immediate bleeding problem is to safely restrain the bird, grasp the blood feather at the base with one hand while holding the wing with the other hand, then pull in an outward straight motion. Maintain pressure on the follicle for up to about one minute or until bleeding stops. This operation usually takes two people to perform safely. To learn how to perform this procedure, consult your avian veterinarian or an experienced aviculturist, otherwise you could injure your pet.

Make sure that the entire feather has been removed. The end should be rounded and blunt. If the feather is fractured midshaft, then bleeding may continue and further operation is needed to remove the embedded feather. Seek professional help if this occurs. If you cannot stop the bleeding, then seek veterinary assistance immediately.

To avoid blood feather trauma, do not perform a straight block clip removing all the primaries. When feathers start to molt and regrow, there are not mature feathers "protecting"

the growing shafts from trauma. See previous *Watchbird* articles on proper wing trims or consult a professional. In smaller birds, be advised that they may still maintain considerable flight capacity so a "slant" clip may work best for them.

Darrel K. Styles, DVM
Dripping Springs, Texas

ANSWER #2: I suspect that in the wild there are fewer bleeding blood feathers than among caged pet birds. Wing clipping resulting in no protection to new soft blood feathers by the neighboring old feathers while the new feather grows, and small cages resulting in trauma to the wings when the bird flaps and strikes the bars of the cage are the usual causes of bleeding "blood feathers." When a blood feather is damaged and bleeds, pulling the blood feather out can stop the bleeding. Other methods can also be used such as using surgical glue to seal the broken end of the quill. Pulling feathers is not without risk as the follicle can be damaged. I would encourage you to seek the advice and expertise of your veterinarian. Consider not trimming your birds wings, and giving your bird a larger cage.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA

ANSWER #3: Birds molt or replace all their feathers at least once a year. The old feather is pushed out of the

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follicle and a new feather follows it out. This new feather is often called a blood feather, as its shaft is filled with blood. As the feather continues to grow, the inner blood filled area recedes and a new shaft and feather result. While the blood filled shaft is either dark blue or pink in color, the new shaft will often be clear or white in coloration. The newly emerging blood feather can be sensitive to the touch and may bleed when traumatized. The emerging blood feathers in the wings and occasionally in the tails, are the most common feathers to be traumatized and start bleeding. This often happens when the bird jumps or attempts to fly.

So, what do you do about a bleeding blood feather? Often times you don't need to do anything other than observe the bird. Just like when you or I fall down and skin our knee, the bleeding will stop assuming that you (or the bird in this case scenario), have normal clotting factors that are being produced from the liver. (I would have

to speculate that in the "wild," this is what occurs when a blood feather is broken.)

If the bleeding does not stop on its own, applying styptic powder with pressure on the part of the feather that is traumatized, usually will stop the bleeding. If the blood feather is dangling, often the dangling end should be removed, as it appears to be painful and irritating to the bird. Only on very rare occasions will a blood feather in its entirety need to be removed. The primary and secondary feathers on the wings attach directly into the bone, and so, by pulling out one of these feathers, the bone itself could be injured. So, consider observing the bird first, applying pressure and styptic powder if needed, and only on rare occasions, consider removing the entire feather.

By the way, the vast majority of birds that I see presented in the clinic for blood feather problems, are cockatiels. And most of these involve birds that have clipped wings, and so when

new feathers emerge, they protrude further out from the line of "cut" feathers, and the trauma leads to a bleeding feather. So, a change in the way the wings are clipped may be a consideration in some birds.

*Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
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Veterinarian Profiles

James M. Harris, DVM

Dr. Harris, who is originally from England, started keeping birds at the early age of four. Dr. Harris is a graduate of the Michigan State University College of Veterinary Medicine. He started the Montclair Veterinary Clinic and Hospital in 1961, which is located in Oakland, California. He breeds macaws and finches, and is well known in the veterinary community for his interest and endeavors with the human-animal bond. Dr. Harris is the father of four children and the proud grandfather of four grandchildren.

Darrel K. Styles, DVM

Dr. Styles is a research veterinarian who has worked within the avicultural community for the past 10 years. He earned his DVM at North Carolina State University. His studies have taken him to work with noted research veterinarians and bird collection throughout the country. His work experience includes such facilities as Avicultural Institute and Pet Farm, Inc., as well as the Avian and Exotic Bird Medicine Department at NC State University. He is currently an owner of Hill Country Aviaries in Dripping Springs, Texas. Dr. Styles is also attending classes at the University of Texas where he is working on his Masters Degree in Medicinal Chemistry.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian

Dr. Worell has a BS in Zoology from the University of Kentucky and a DVM from Auburn University. She is a diplomat of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners, where she was among the first group of veterinarians to be certified as an avian specialist. She is the owner of All Pets Medical Centre, in West Hills, California. Dr. Worell is an avid aviculturist, raising cockatoos, pionus, Greys and Eclectus Parrots. In the past, Dr. Worell was the AFA State Coordinator Chairman and chairman of the AFA veterinary program.

She served as the Association of Avian Veterinarians Chairperson for both the research and client education committees for several years, as well as being on the board of directors. She is on the editorial staff of several major avian and exotic veterinary publications as well as a contributor to major avian textbooks. She is known internationally for her research on hemochromatosis in toucans. 

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