Answer 1: Feathers are highly specialized structures covering birds. As reptiles evolved and changed from cold-blooded creatures having the same body temperature as their environment to warm-blooded creatures able to produce heat and gain independence from their environmental temperature, there was a need to conserve heat. To do so, the scales of reptiles changed to form the variety of feathers we know today. Feathers have a variety of functions: heat conservation, waterproofing, protection from trauma, display, and flight to name a few. The various functions of feathers are dependent on their structure and position. Feathers wear out, and since they do not continuously grow as in the case with hair, they are replaced periodically. The process is called moult.

To maintain normal structure and position and to assist new feathers to free themselves from their protective sheaths, birds groom. This activity is called preening. Normally birds spend up to 25% of their waking hours preening.
preening. As is the case with any particular activity within a group of individuals, there is a wide variation in the time spent on this activity by various individuals. Some birds rarely preen, thus their feather coats always have a disheveled appearance. Most birds, however, spend a reasonable amount of their time preening and have well manicured, properly arranged feathers. Some birds preen excessively thereby damaging and/or destroying their feathers in the process.

In addition to preening, birds in the wild spend a considerable amount of their waking hours seeking and consuming food. This may account for up to 60% of their daytime activity. Quite a bit of time is also spent interacting with their fellow flockmates. It is no wonder, then, that the captive, caged bird with limited social interactions, with provision of all food supply, often occupies its time by excessively preening its feathers. There certainly are medical reasons for excessive preening resulting in feather picking or chewing and a thorough work-up by a veterinarian is needed to confirm or rule out these causes. Infections, internal and external parasites and a number of other physical causes producing pruritis (itching) or pain can result in the bird’s feather destructive activity.

By and large, though, the bulk of feather picking activity is psychogenic in origin. Isolation, boredom, and loneliness contribute to the problem. Since preening in reasonable amounts is a normal daily activity in the bird’s life, once excessive preening is estab-
lished it can be very difficult to modify
and/or change.

Excessive preening is often con-
trolled by restraint devices such as
collars. The collars mechanically pre-
vent the bird from reaching its feathers,
but their use alone even for extended
periods is rarely curative unless efforts
are made to redirect the bird’s atten-
tion and activity. Without these behav-
ioral and/or environmental modifica-
tions, the newly replaced feathers will
be quickly mutilated or pulled when the
collar is removed.

Nature has provided birds with an
amazing organ, the beak. In the case of
psittacines, the beak can hold and
explore objects with great gentleness
and at the same time, pry, crack, split,
crush, and tear. Some species, such as
cockatoos, are particularly
active with their beaks. Providing them
with soft 2” by 4” pine perches allows
them to spend hours splintering the
wood, satisfying their needs and at the
same time distracting them from over-
preening.

Toys can also be used as diversions.
They should be non-toxic, durable,
changed often and are most successful
when so constructed that the bird is
kept frustrated trying to move, disman-
tle or manipulate its structure. Food
items can also occupy birds. Nuts need
to be opened and varieties of fruits,
vegetables and other foods allow the
bird to spend time exploring its diet.

The environment can serve as a div-
ersion. This can be especially helpful
for solitary birds that are without com-
pny for extended periods of time.
Both visual and auditory diversions
can be used. Move the bird’s cage near
the window allowing access to the
view. (Avoid direct sun!) Keep the tele-
vision on during the day or leave a rea-
dio on while away.

A bird companion or mate is some-
times helpful. A companion can be
brought in to move, disman-
tle the bird’s body. Often, the whole
body may be devoid of all but the down
feathers and those covering the head
and neck region. These areas are, of
course, unreachable by the bird’s
inquisitive beak.

The reasons for self-inflicted feather
removal or destruction vary greatly
with the individual bird, although cer-
tain generalities can be made. Often,
more than one factor may be involved,
and the initial cause for the behavior
may have long been forgotten by the
bird. The behavior may have become a
ritualistic part of the bird’s daily
behavior, possibly more like a habit in
nature.

In general, stress, either experienced
intrinsically and/or extrinsically,
appears to be the basis for most poten-
tial causes. And, of course, what is per-
cieved as stressful to the bird may not
appear so to its human caretakers.
Potential stress induced factors
include: nutritional deficiencies;
abnormal molt or a pruritus (itching)
associated with the molt; systemic
(involving the whole body) or local-
ized infections; growths that irritate
the bird; changes in the hormonal
levels (such as sex hormones); related
to nervousness, jealousy, or emo-
tional disturbances; related to boredom, inac-
tivity or used as an attention getting
device; exaggerated or excessive preening behavior; related to brain or neuronal chemical imbalances; presence of external parasites; environmental conditions such as change in season; social interactions or lack of, with other birds, family members, or pets.

As is apparent, the potential causes for feather picking or mutilation can be numerous. Thus, a simple cure is not often readily available. Ideally, if a specific reason for the feather picking can be identified, a more appropriate treatment regime can be initiated, which basically involves eliminating the cause. More commonly, though, no specific cause can be identified and thus treatment may be difficult and unrewarding for all concerned.

A diagnostic workup, including a blood panel, cholangial and cloacal cultures, a psittacosis test, and a fecal examination for the presence of internal parasites should accompany a physical exam of the patient. Additional diagnostic tests such as whole body radiographs, skin scrapings, and feather follicle cultures may be recommended.

In those cases where no specific cause has been identified, the bird’s nutritional status and environmental situation should be reviewed. If the diet is deemed adequate, then certain environmental changes might be tried. These changes might involve addition of playthings or toys, moving the cage to an area of either more or less activity or by a window, purchase of a larger, more spacious cage, additional playtime and social interaction with the owner or other birds, addition of another bird or mate, addition of the radio or television when the owner is not present, and bi-weekly misting or showering of the bird.

Additional potential treatments involve the use of medications such as repository hormones, sedatives, or drugs to change the balance of chemical transmitters in the brain.

Occasionally, the addition of a small amount of sea salt to the bird’s diet may decrease feather picking, as may the use of collars.

As one can see, this common problem has many interesting facets which influence the potential cause and treatment of the feather picking bird. Many birds will continue feather picking no matter what avenues of treatment are tried and this thought should be kept in mind when approaching a non-responsive feather picking bird.

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Woodland Hills, California

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