

Feather Plucking Survey Results

Finally an Answer

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"Why is my parrot plucking?" This question, which seems to be the all-time number one avicultural enigma, is difficult to answer, because there are so many viable reasons. Once it has been ascertained that no medical cause exists and every other possible idea has been explored, both from experts and other bird owners, there should be a realization that something has been overlooked.

To find out what that something was, with participation from people with pluckers, a practical option presented itself in the form of a survey for feather pluckers. It seemed to be significantly important to try to find out the answer to...*Why does my parrot pluck, when none of the usual reasons fit?*

The last six months of 1995, members of The Real Macaw Parrot Club of New Jersey and The Big Apple Bird Club of New York, aided by volunteers from the Internet, and others who wished to remain anonymous, contributed to a "Feather Plucking Survey" initialed by The Real Macaw Parrot Club newsletter. Its primary purpose was to see if an answer could be found on *why parrots pluck*. The results were amazing and of all the reasons we thought parrots plucked, everyone, including veterinarians, overlooked a reason that only surfaced when all the data had been collated, graphed, and compared. The following article has the long-awaited results of that survey.

One hundred sixty-eight (168) birds participated in the survey. Other responses were from people who did not have a bird that plucked, but wished to include data that might be helpful.

One hundred fifty-nine (159) of the birds had been veterinarian checked, while nine had not. The most common veterinary diagnosis was *no* diagnosis of a medical problem. Veterinarian

diagnoses: 1—proventricular dilatation; 1—wings clipped at too young an age; 2—obesity; 2—nutrition related; 2—thyroid problems; 3—bacterial infections; 3—low calcium; 3—habit; 4—yeast infections; 5—dry skin; 5—allergies; 8—sexual frustration; 27—behavioral, psychological, emotional, and neurotic; 9—not checked; 93—no diagnosis.

One of the questions on the survey was "Why do you think your parrot plucks?"

Some of the answers were: change in surrounding areas, taking the bird on vacation, abuse by previous owner, bird's routine upset by owner changing job hours, stressful molt, had veterinarian experience, previous owner died or gave the bird away (separation anxiety), rejection by another bird or person, jealousy of a new baby or a new bird, room temperature, stressful quarantine, weaned too young, overindulged when young then ignored, environmental stress from noises inside or outside the home and the list goes on.

One veterinarian with whom I discussed this problem suggested that some of the smaller birds from New York City (or other major cities) that are pluckers, might pluck because of an allergy to mold found in many older city apartment walls. This is worth pursuing as the majority of small bird pluckers (in the survey) were from a large city, while the majority of large bird pluckers were from more rural areas.

In most cases, the birds with a diagnosed medical problem stopped plucking when they received proper veterinary care. Some birds with suspected nutritional problems stopped plucking when their diet was improved. Birds with sexual frustrations were cured when they were allowed to mate. Dry skin problems

(mostly from homes with gas hot air heat) were helped with the use of a humidifier and/or frequent misting.

The use of Elizabethan collars was useless in almost all cases. The use of anti-picking formulas and allergy medications only helped in three cases (in two cases, the medication turned the feathers red until the next molt). Giving the bird more attention was a big help in birds that had been left alone for a long period of time each day.

Other interesting attempts at a solution (some worked, some did not): putting the bird on a schedule, putting the bird in a larger cage, acupuncture, Vitamin E squeezed over seed, more sunshine, higher fat diet, more toys, surgery, Vitamin B, use of colored feather dusters for preening, putting a wig near the cage for bird to preen, and giving sips of mild chamomile tea.

Most of the questions in the survey were there only to eliminate all inconsequential events and to weed out all pluckers that were helped by eliminating either a medical or environmental problem.

So now what? As with all behavioral problems, no matter what type of animal...or person...it is wise to try to "look" at the world in the same way as they do. After collating all the surveys and singling out all the birds that had not been diagnosed, I noticed something that cannot be overlooked:

For the most part, every question resulted in answers that, when compared, zeroed each other out, but in almost every case, the undiagnosed bird lived in the same house with another bird that was not just another bird, but a bird from a different continent.

Results:

50 African Birds: 47 lived with birds from a different continent
55 South American Birds: 42 lived with birds from a different continent
35 Australian Birds: 33 lived with birds from a different continent
28 Island Birds: 27 lived with bird from a different continent
168 Birds in Survey: 149 lived with birds from a different continent



What makes you think this Amazon is a feather picker?

Of the 19 birds that did not live with another bird from a different continent, medical reasons for their plucking were either diagnosed, or other reasons were suspected by the owner. Some of the birds that lived with other birds from a different continent also had medical problems or had been misdiagnosed

African Greys (Africa), Cockatoos (Australia), and Eclectus (Island) seem to be the ones that are most prone to plucking, while the South American birds (Macaws, Conures, Amazons) seem to be the ones that are the least bothered. South American birds tended to have the most sexual frustration.

When you think about it, people will unconsciously seek out people of their own race, religion, and nationality. Sometimes, people do not trust other people who are different than they are until they become better acquainted with them. Birds do not really know how to do this.

What if you put a person in a cage with a lion? They are both mammals...right? But, they are vastly different. Most people would start screaming or cowering in a corner if they were kept locked in a cage with this creature. On the other hand, locking two people in a cage together would not enact the same reactions.

So why is it different with birds? A

bird is a bird, however, the hawk eats the sparrow. Birds from different continents were never meant to meet in nature, but humans forced this upon them, both in zoos and in the private home. Some are able to overcome their obvious fear or nervousness upon meeting a bird that is foreign to them, but others do not.

These early results are quite enlightening and deserve to be thoroughly researched. If you can believe these results and have birds from different continents living together, and wish to do something to help, I suggest that you try keeping your birds in separate rooms. If you have a bird that does not pluck and you have been thinking of obtaining another parrot, you might think twice about which species you choose. Try to purchase another bird that is indigenous to the same continent as the bird that you already have.

Personal case: My African Grey, Chukeigh, is now 10 years old and started plucking when she was seven. I have tried for three years to find the possible reasons for her plucking. I narrowed it down to:

- She is now sexually mature -- forget that; she shows absolutely no interest whatsoever in breeding.
- I gave up breeding canaries and they were no longer in the house -- I recently purchased two canaries especially for her, but her only interest is in imitating them.
- A veterinarian told me to stop giving her chicken bones -- I have now resumed giving them to her -- she is so glad to have them back, but she is still using her bare chest as a bib.
- A medical reason? -- She is vet checked frequently and all medical causes have been ruled out.
- Boredom? -- Not likely, she has a large cage, a multitude of toys that are changed frequently, a radio to listen to, and a household of people who are around night and day.

After looking at the results of the feather plucking survey, I realized that I had overlooked one other thing that happened when Chukeigh started plucking. That was the year that I adopted my Orange-winged Amazon A bird from a different continent! The

two birds have been in the same room together for three years and I could never understand why they hated each other. I thought that they were jealous, however, if the results of the survey are to be believed, the reason might just be terror.

Using the results of the survey, I have tried to take steps to remedy my own situation. Since giving up my Amazon is not an option, I tried to change the environment in the bird-room. Both birds have very large cages that I placed across from each other instead of side-by-side and I placed the Grey's playpen on top of her cage, which instantly gave her the higher cage. I am hoping that this will give her the confidence to think that she is the dominant bird. Guess what?? There is definitely less skin showing on her bare chest and I think she is ready to give up her old fashion statement!

I would like to thank all the people who responded to this survey and I hope the findings will help their affected birds, as well as others that are experiencing the same problem. It is important for all aviculturists to pursue these results either on their own or preferably as a group (other clubs).

[Note from the author: An important fact that is worth mentioning and should not be overlooked: There were approximately 300 other participating birds that were disqualified because some of the inconsequential questions on the survey were left blank (these were needed as a control). However, had these birds not been disqualified, the results on the scale would have shown that 99% of the birds in the survey were housed with a bird from a different continent.]

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Inconsequential Questions

Following are the results from some of the questions asked in the survey, that ultimately proved to be inconsequential.

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|---------------------------|---------------------|--|
| 1. USE OF VITA LITES | Yes - 78 No - 90 | Result: Almost equal |
| 2. FOOD (seed) | Yes - 107 | Result: Almost all birds ate fruit and veggies, and seed verses pellets is almost equal, some birds ate both |
| (pellets) | Yes - 99 | |
| (fruit & veg) | Yes - 160 | |
| 3. OTHER ANIMALS IN HOME: | Yes - 87 No - 81 | Result: Almost equal |
| 4. USE OF HUMIDIFIER: | Yes - 80 No - 88 | Result: Almost equal |

