

# OPINIONS:

## Letter regarding feather picking...

The article, "Feather Plucking Survey..." by Donna Sleight in Nov/Dec *Watchbird* was in many ways a significant breakthrough. The two fine bird clubs and all those who aided in this survey should be congratulated for an effort, brilliant in its conception and endless with possibility.

This is precisely the kind of coordinated work with published conclusions that American bird clubs and societies (with full support by AFA!) should be undertaking as a new era of aviculture sweeps upon us all. An imaginative joining of hands for the

sake of our birds, I'd call it.

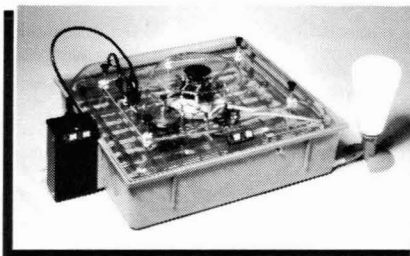
Further consideration should be given to some of the points raised in this article:

- Mold found in urban apartment walls can certainly lead to allergies in humans — likewise, probably in psittacines. However, another logical interpretation of the figures in the survey is that a majority of city dwellers choose to purchase smaller (hence quieter, cleaner, easier to keep) birds, while we have found in our bird shop that rural residents often opt for large parrots. This would explain results.

- The use of the "Elizabethan" collar is not always totally useless. I must say, I do not rely on this method of coping with a feather-plucking parrot simply because *prevention* of self-mutilation is not *cure*. Take the collar off and, like as not, such behavior resumes. Negatively, collars also prevent birds from grooming, inhibit climbing, eating, bathing and other normal tendencies. Yet, temporary prescribed use of a collar can do wonders to break the cycle of a chronic plucking parrot, allowing new feather growth to reach significant improvement while a complete program for environmental change, daily care, and behavior modification is formulated. In those cases where a psittacine has picked a bloody spot on itself, a collar is extremely beneficial for healing.

- If it is true there are medications presently being given by veterinarians which turn a bird's feathers red, then I believe side effects and secondary dangers to the parrot's endocrine system could be involved.

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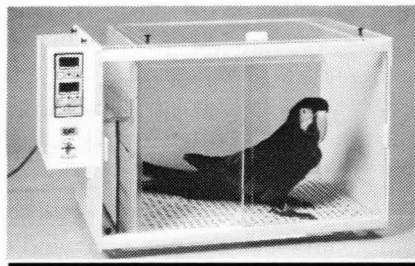
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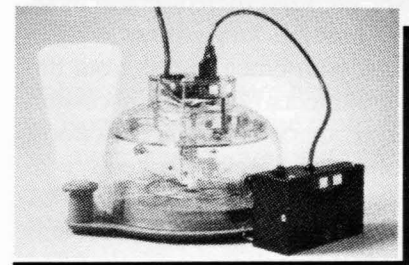
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# Lighting Requirements for Indoor Breeding

Steven P. Hartman, Sunbury, OH

Most often light is considered to be a vehicle to make our environment visible. As an indoor parrot breeder, I find it necessary to think of light in much broader terms. The consequences of the sun's radiation is greater than that portion of the electromagnetic field produced by the sun that we can see with our eyes. In addition to the visible products of the sun, we also need to understand the contributions of low frequency infrared waves, high frequency ultraviolet waves, and all of the consequential effects the sun would have on our birds.

Understanding my own limitations when it came to developing a lighting program for my aviary, I began by sorting out the ways I see light and the effect I believe light has on the environment and the diurnal clock of our birds.

## ULTRAVIOLET

My studies have taught me that the Ultraviolet and Infrared radiation portion of light is probably the most overlooked spectrum of the sun's radiation in an indoor aviary. The three most important consequences of Ultraviolet radiation in the environment are disinfection, vitamin D synthesis and the psychological well being of the birds.

• Of the mentioned "interesting attempts at solution" in this article, I would request from Donna a letter clarifying which worked and which did not. I have heard of positive results with acupuncture, for example; and chamomile teas are used as calming agents. What other potential cures did the survey suggest?

• When the survey responses for the most part "zeroed each other out," it might be necessary to begin species-specific investigation. (In fact, this might be one of the areas of focus for a second, more in-depth survey to follow). Feather plucking in Senegals is not always equivalent to that in Budgies or macaws. What is important, is that any and every successful treatment be documented, catalogued and made available to others keeping parrots of the same species. A feather-plucking network of instant reference access for bird owners would also be a logical next step.

• It is true there are many feather-picking psittacines which live with psittacines native to another continent. (It is all too true that pet owners seem to want one of each vastly different birds, rather than four types of macaws, etc.) But there are also thousands of non-plucking parrots living in situations with other parrots from different continents. We have successfully raised macaws with cockatoos, Amazons with Greys, lorikeets with *Brotogeris*, and conures with *Poicephalus*, to name a few. I believe it is not the fact that the parrots are different in vocalization and mannerism which matters most, but how they are introduced and subsequently kept. Some pet owners unknowingly favor the newest bird in the household (especially if it is a baby). This has devastating effects upon the emotional health of a former favorite.

In addition, I have seen literally hundreds of feather-picking parrots kept with another bird or birds from their own continent. Even same species will manifest plucking in one or more of the birds. Greys kept together, cockatoos, macaws, conures, lories, Cockatiels, Hawk-headed, Capes, Amazons, and on and on.

To suggest that prospective pet buyers not purchase psittacines from the

same original continent on the basis of the statistics of this survey is probably premature and in the realm of conjecture. I believe *kind* of species is much less important to normal health of parrots kept in the same space than is *depth of their friendship* one to another.

We have a totally naked Blue-crowned conure case where the conure was housed with a Blue and Gold Macaw. Dominance by the larger bird was out of balance for years resulting in the conure's self-mutilation.

• Finally, I note that Donna has truly hit upon something with her African Grey/Orange-winged Amazon relationship. As she mentioned to our readers, when this kind of plucking motive is discovered, it is best to move the parrots to different rooms.

Two of her rejected reasons for the Grey plucking may be elaborated upon: One—sexual frustration. A sexually mature plucking parrot does not necessarily show any interest whatsoever in breeding. Certain dysfunctional psittacines do not know *what* they need to make themselves happy—minus a flock of their own species, they have no way to learn such. Close companionship in parrots (just as in humans) is not always sexual. That is why so many hookbills bond for life.

Secondly, boredom. All the larger cages, multitudes of toys, radio, TV, and households of humans in the whole world are not always enough to stave off birdie boredom, especially in the more intelligent and spontaneous species. These creatures we keep are still wild, exotic animals. I know, for I have seen, how much a domesticated parrot can crave the rain and wind on its feathers, a night out in the trees under the moonlight, or an open sky above and the air beneath its wings!!! Feather plucking is a complex, multi-faceted problem. Like fingernail biting and teeth grinding in humans, there are often hidden underlying causes. In all cases I have successfully treated, the one surefire remedy was change. Change that reduced the stress causing the nervous, abnormal habit.

So good luck to those of you also working on this enigma. Keep those surveys coming! We parrot lovers thank you.

Mahalo nui loa, *Eb Crauens* ➤