



Feather Destruction:

Are There Solutions?

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Most parrot owners never are faced with the heartbreak of having their beautifully feathered tropical treasure reduce itself to a sad and bedraggled-looking ghost of its former self. But when feather destruction does happen, this obsessive, destructive behavior pattern causes great stress to the parrot owner who must deal with it on a daily basis and wonder if they have failed their feathered friend.

Once a parrot discovers the pastime of feather chewing, plucking, stripping, barbering, clipping, pulling, or otherwise destroying its own feathers, it quickly becomes a satisfying habit much like nail biting in humans. As difficult as it may be to understand the satisfaction derived from biting and chewing fingernails, many people do it. The

nail biting habit in humans correlates well with the feather biting habit in parrots. Once this habit becomes established, it is extremely difficult to break.

The most important criterion in dealing with feather destruction is the determination as to whether it is a MEDICAL or a NON-MEDICAL (behavioral) problem. One way to make this determination is to note whether or not the head and upper neck feathers are involved. If there is a problem which involves the head and upper neck feathers, then I strongly advise a trip to a good avian vet. Since the bird cannot reach the feathers in these areas (assuming that it is not being plucked by another bird), the likelihood of a medical problem is very real. Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (Pbfd) is the greatest cause

for concern in this situation. Pbfd is a deadly avian disease that attacks the immune system of parrots much as AIDS does in humans. If a bird that appears to be plucking its feathers has any signs of deformed feathers or of beak problems, a trip to an avian veterinarian is a necessity.

Many other medical causes may be suspected, such as bacterial, viral, fungal or parasitic diseases, tumors, cysts, heavy metal poisoning, allergies, or malnutrition. These causes can be ruled out by an avian veterinarian.

Feather lice are very rarely found in caged birds and are almost never the cause of feather destruction. It is a dangerous practice to spray birds for lice "just in case." This should be done only by an avian vet, since many birds have been harmed by the indiscriminate use of toxic preparations marketed to control bird lice.

If the bird is plucked only in the areas that it can reach, but has normal feathering on the head and upper neck, more than likely it is a behavioral problem. Here are some of the possible causes of non-medical plucking, most of them in the general category of stress. Following each cause are some possible solutions.

Low Humidity

This is all too common in our dry and sometimes artificially heated homes. It is not a natural environment for most parrots. The lack of humidity can cause their skin to become dry, flaky, and itchy. What starts as an attempt to scratch an itch can quickly evolve into fullblown feather plucking, and once it becomes a habit, it is very difficult to stop. The easiest way to supply extra humidity is to provide frequent baths, and mist from a spray bottle. Birds seem to avoid picking damp or wet feathers. If this does not solve the problem, here are a few other suggestions.

Solutions

- Humidifiers that are well maintained, and never allowed to become dirty and to pump dangerous fungal spores into the air, can help to create a more moist and natural environment for the parrot bothered by itchy skin.
- If one does not wish to bother with this source of humidity, a handy spray

bottle or a clothes drying rack in the bird room on which to dry the family's laundered towels works just as well. Otherwise, a sheet or a large towel can be wet and squeezed partially dry and placed on the rack. It may not secure a spot for your home in *House Beautiful* magazine, but it will work wonderfully well to moisturize the atmosphere for your parrots.

- *Aloe vera* spray is quite effective in soothing and moisturizing itchy skin, thereby preventing plucking. Feathers that are damp and that taste of *Aloe* do not seem to be nearly as appealing to a feather plucker. One of the purest ready-made sprays is GEORGE'S Aloe Spray, and it comes in a spray bottle, eight ounces for around five dollars. If you cannot locate a health food store that carries this spray, you can easily make your own with *Aloe vera* juice and distilled water in a spray bottle. Four parts water to one part *Aloe* is a good solution. It can be made stronger or weaker according to your needs. When buying the *Aloe vera*, look for the purest possible juice, not gel. Many of the gels are simply juice with added thickeners that you should not spray on your bird's feathers. If you buy the more expensive brands, you will get a product with no additional ingredients, which in themselves can create problems. The bird can be sprayed several times a day and sometimes this alone will solve the problem.

Boredom

Boredom is a big problem with domestic parrots! If they were in their natural habitat, they would spend a great deal of time playing, flying from place to place, foraging for food and water, bathing, mutually preening and grooming, building nests, feeding and caring for their young, and shredding tree branches and leaves for the sheer joy of it!

Solutions

- Provide your parrots with a variety of toys and other objects with which to busy their beaks. Natural non-toxic unsprayed tree branches are a cheap and easy way to provide something other than their own feathers to destroy. Large pine cones can occupy a beak for a good deal of time. Food

toys also provide a natural activity that can occupy much of their time. When we give our parrots food that requires little or no effort to consume, we leave more time for undesirable activities like feather destruction. Unshelled nuts require time to eat, and parrots seem to enjoy the challenge of digging out elusive nutmeats. For parrots that cannot crack pecans and walnuts, we can get the process started with a quick squeeze in a nutcracker. That will still leave lots of work for the bird to do.

Threading different types of food through cage bars can give parrots a natural feeding activity and tasty treats to boot. A millet spray can occupy a bird for hours. Carrot tops and the leaves of collards and other greens woven through cage bars near the perching area offer a natural foraging activity to caged birds. Clean and natural rawhide strips tied into many knots on the cage bars can keep a beak busy for hours.

Many "treat toys" are available from several parrot toy manufacturers too. Ropes and swings can provide excellent exercise and fun. Pieces of wood,

such as pine, will be much appreciated by most parrots. Indeed, it is part of the breeding ritual of some birds to make toothpicks of two by fours. If they were provided a *real* nest such as a dead tree log, they would spend a great deal of time excavating the interior of the log. The least we can do is to provide them with an outlet to sublimate this natural urge by giving them pieces of safe, clean wood to chew and destroy.

- For the non-breeding pet parrot, time spent by the owner interacting with the bird is important. One should not acquire a parrot as a single pet if there is no time to spend with it. Human companionship is the only social outlet for a single pet and therefore very important. And, isn't that why many of us want parrots? One should set aside a regular time to interact with the parrot. Even a 30 second session of sweet talk or a quick snuggle first thing in the morning and last thing at night could make all the difference in the security level of a lone pet parrot. And what a wonderful way to start and end *your* day too!

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Anxiety

This is a problem with many parrots. Considering the complex social structure of parrots in the wild, and the large territory that would be their natural heritage, is it any wonder that living a fishbowl existence in human homes would cause a bird to turn its frustration inward? Add to this the stress of noisy children and other pets that could represent potential predators to caged parrots, and one can easily understand that their lives in captivity are stressful.

Being confined to a space that is not large enough for them to get adequate exercise and activity that they need is another cause of anxiety. When the natural sleep cycle of birds in the rainforest is replaced by electric lights that stay on half the night, sleep deprivation can add to the problem.

Parrots are exquisitely sensitive to our emotional states. If you are anxious, worried, or upset, take a few deep breaths and leave your worries behind when you interact with your feathered friend. Many cases of feather plucking have begun when parrots mirrored their over-anxious owner's anxiety and frustration.

Parrots in captivity become extremely bonded to their "human mates" in the absence of a mate of their own kind. Lack of interaction with their human flock is a common cause of anxiety. Separation anxiety is a problem that often brings on the first episode of feather plucking. Our feathered friends have no way of knowing that eventually we will *reappear* when we suddenly *disappear* from their little world, and considering their high degree of intelligence, it is not surprising that they react in negative ways.

Solutions

- If your parrot is very human-bonded, *make time* to interact with it every day, preferably on a schedule that the bird can anticipate. That does not mean that it must have your undivided attention, but that it *believes* that you are interacting with it. Just holding the bird and making eye contact with it as you speak on the phone can suffice in a pinch. If you spend lots of time at the computer, a perch close to your desk can make your bird feel loved and

wanted. When I'm working in the kitchen, I enjoy chatting with individual members of my little flock as they play on their porta-perch on the bar in front of me. Even if I'm speaking with a non-feathered friend at the bar, as long as I make eye contact with them periodically, my feathered friends seem convinced that I'm talking only to them.

- Give your parrot the proper-sized living space. Life in a cage is not very exciting. Be sure to provide a rope, a swing, many interesting toys, and wood to chew. Ideally, a parrot will have several different stations around the house so that he can have a change of scenery. Imagine the boredom of spending your entire life in one corner of one room.

- Try to limit the problem of loud noises or anything else in the bird's environment which it may perceive as danger. Obviously, if the bird can see predators such as hawks and cats in its vicinity it will become anxious.

- If you must be away for an extended period of time, be sure to provide all the fun distractions possible. Leaving a TV or radio on a timer can be sufficient for a short time away, but for longer periods it is preferable to find someone who is at home most of the time to interact with the bird on whatever level possible, to distract it from the stress caused by your absence.

- If necessary, a smaller cage can be set up in a quieter area of the home for a bird to sleep undisturbed when family activities continue past birdie bedtime. Parrots need their 12 hours of undisturbed sleep every night.

As a last resort, collars can be used, or we can intervene chemically to deal with the problem of anxiety-based feather destruction. Avian vets sometimes use Haloperidol (Haldol) to calm an anxious bird. However, I prefer the use of natural anti-anxiety and antidepressant remedies. Some of the herbal remedies that currently are being tested are ST. JOHNS WORT, KAVA KAVA, VALERIAN ROOT, and GRAPE-SEED EXTRACT. Several holistic vets now use acupuncture successfully in some cases of feather plucking. No one thing works in every case, but all avenues should be explored until an effective solution is found.

Hormonal Frustration

This cannot be overlooked as a cause of feather destruction in a sexually mature parrot. The urge to reproduce is strong in some parrots and it must be acknowledged. When parrots become extremely bonded to us, we can *cause* feather plucking problem ourselves by unknowingly exhibiting what they interpret as courtship behavior. We can unwittingly stimulate them to the point of regurgitating food to us as though we were their mates, and even cause them to discover self-gratification through sexually stimulating themselves on parts of our bodies (hands, arms, legs) that they perceive appropriate for mating. If we cannot provide them with a real mate, then we must learn to govern our interaction with them so as not to stimulate their urge to reproduce with us, thereby frustrating them to the point of turning their frustration inward and possibly destroying their feathers.

Solutions

- When a parrot becomes sexually mature, if not before, provide the proper mate and let them fulfill their natural destiny by reproducing.

- If it is impossible to allow this, you will need to give them more attention, but you must conduct your interaction with them in such a way that you do not stimulate their reproductive urges. Careful observation will tell you what you can and cannot do in this regard. If you inadvertently "turn on" a parrot and it regurgitates to you, do not react.

- Ignore the behavior so as not to reinforce it; distract the parrot with another activity; and then avoid whatever action precipitated it. Do not punish or provide drama following this behavior.

Conclusion

Chronic and habitual feather destruction may be very difficult to stop. It will require a serious and long-term commitment on the part of the owner, and even then some birds never can be "cured." Anyone who acquires a parrot should be prepared to love this sensitive and intelligent creature "for better or for worse," with or without its beautiful feathers. Could *you* love a "plucky ducky?" 