

# Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by

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All Pets Medical Center, West Hills, CA

**Question #1:** Is there a safe alternative to microchipping for the identification of parrots? I heard that DNA printing will be the method of choice in the near future. Is this true and do you know of any other safe and non-invasive methods?

*G. Hood, Nebraska*

**Answer#1:** Birds can be identified in a number of ways. Banding has been used for decades, is non-invasive, but can be removed. The DNA is unique to each individual and can be recorded but requires collecting a blood sample which is somewhat invasive. A properly placed microchip that is registered is still the ideal method of identifying your bird. In the not too distant future, microchips, in addition to being scanned for a number, will also be able to be scanned for the body temperature of the individual in which it is placed. These chips will be satellite connected to determine their accurate location anywhere on the planet.

*James M. Harris, DVM*  
Oakland, CA

**Answer#2:** Your question implies that microchipping is not safe and I was wondering what might have occurred that gave you that impression. The only problems that I have experienced with the microchip are occasional bleeding immediately following implantation, which usually stops quickly with pressure, and a couple of chips that did not read after implantation. This occurred because of a microscopic crack that allowed body fluid into the chip, so it could not function. I do not implant very small birds, like parrotlets, because of the large size of the microchip and implantation needle. DNA printing is certainly a good way of identifying an individual, however it is not widely available and it is costly. At this point, the microchip is still the best insurance against loss or theft.

*Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian*  
Jacksonville, Florida

**Answer #3:** I personally at this time do recommend microchipping as the best means of permanent identification for birds and other animals. I am aware of very few problems with the use of the technique and have no hesitation in recommending microchipping for birds the size of Grey-cheeked Parakeets and larger.

The limitations of the technology must be kept in mind, as it is not a "Lo-Jack" as is used in automobiles – meaning, that if the pet is lost or stolen, the system will not beep and locate the missing bird. Most commonly, when a bird is stolen it is gone for good, as the microchip cannot be used for identification unless the bird is taken into hand and the chip read.

Other than these drawbacks, the system is great and many pets have been returned to owners.

Regarding DNA fingerprinting for permanent identification, I am aware the technology exists, but I am not sure of its accuracy and legal standpoints should the case be drawn into the courtroom. Look what happened with OJ Simpson! Consultation with a commercial company offering the technology would be a consideration if you have questions or doubts about this technology.

As we readily see in our everyday lives, new technology is evolving all the time. Therefore, keep your eyes and ears open for new developments that will improve our own as well as the lives of our avian companions.

*Amy B. Worell, DVM*  
West Hills, CA

**Question #2:** What is your opinion of the use of the increasingly popular harnesses, diapers, and "flight suits" for parrots?

*O. Singleton,*  
Connecticut

**Answer #1:** In spite of the fact that many pets including birds have surrogate roles such as child substitutes, they are not human infants or toddlers and in my opinion these restrictive devices are not appropriate.

*James M. Harris, DVM*  
Oakland, CA

**Answer #2:** Since birds are flighted creatures and the feathers need to be unimpaired for them to be aerodynamic, their natural instinct is to be free of anything on the feathers. The birds spend around 25% of the time grooming the feathers to be sure they are clean, sleek, and ready for flight. For this reason, any type of "clothing" is not going to be well received. It is possible for the bird to be trained to tolerate these items, but it is difficult. I think the harness is a good idea, especially if you are going outside for a walk with the bird since there are many hazards out there including traffic and other animals. The safest way to transport, however, is with a carrier. I do not have any experience with the diapers or flight suits, but I worry about the diaper because if it is not changed often, the feces can stick to the feathers around the vent or cause dermatitis on the skin.

*Rhoda Stevenson, DVM, ABVP-Avian*  
Jacksonville, Florida

**Answer#3:** I personally do not like the idea of harnesses, diapers, or flight suits for birds. Only rarely have I seen birds come into my practice with harnesses on them. I have had no negative experiences with the use of them in birds but do recall a situation with an iguana in a harness that suddenly moved and broke its leg due to the harness. I guess I feel more comfortable with traditional methods of restraint such as carriers when transport is needed, clipped wings when birds are outside, and either potty training or use of a paper towel to clean up the poop when it drops.

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