The Other Side of Feather Destruction There is Hope

By Jayne Meyers, San Francisco, CA

A bird that is determined to pick, pluck, barber, or otherwise destroy its plumage can cause its owner a type of frustration unlike any other. Despite providing the healthiest possible diet, spacious accommodations, a variety of toys, daily companionship, and undying love, sometimes our feathered friends begin and continue their pursuit of nakedness for no apparent reason. Having survived two bouts of feather destruction with my eight-year old Solomon Island Eclectus named Bink E Berde, I have seen the light at the end of the tunnel (or perhaps I should say at the end of the "shaft").

From the moment of our first meeting, Bink E has been an agreeable, outgoing and mellow Eclectus. I have been fortunate because my career made it relatively easy to provide him with an enhanced lifestyle, including his very own spot at the law firm where I worked. In fact, Bink E cheerfully accompanied me to work every day for nearly seven years, relishing his role as chief attention grabber and the world's first "Parrotlegal."

During our off hours, Bink E Berde has accompanied me on long daily walks around San Francisco, becoming a welcome visitor at all of the businesses in my neighborhood. He delights in the sights and sounds of the city, frequently chatting, singing or whistling as we wander. He enjoys being fussed over by his many friends and acquaintances. Recently, he embarked on a career as a "feathered therapist," participating in animal assisted therapy visits to various nursing homes, senior citizen day care centers, and other facilities in San Francisco. A very vocal fellow, Bink E often requests an adventure by saying "out now" and expresses his delight with exclamations of "happy bird" and "I love you."

During the autumn of 2001 when he was not quite six years old, Bink E experienced what I thought was a severe molt. I had never seen him with so many bald spots or such extensive feather loss. It never occurred to me that he might be feather picking, primarily because I had never witnessed him deliberately removing a feather. His personality was the same and there had been no changes in his diet, environment, or routine. Bink E's feather loss took place over a short period of time. After a few weeks of finding feathers in the cage, feathers on the floor and feathers in his food and water crocks, the shedding stopped. I thought his molt was over and that I soon would see new pinfeathers. I tried to keep Bink E as comfortable as possible with frequent baths and regular misting with a high quality aloe spray. Extra portions of protein and calcium rich foods were added to his diet to encourage feather growth. I truly believed I was dealing with nothing more serious than an extreme molt.

When there was zero feather regeneration after three or four months (and I do mean zero — not a pin feather in sight), I became concerned. Still believing that this was a molt, albeit a bizarre molt, we headed for the vet. I hoped for reassurance that there was no active disease process preventing the growth of new feathers. Well, it took no longer than ten seconds flat for the good doctor to enlighten me, pointing out that Bink E was exhibiting a typical feather picking pattern across his breast, shoulders, legs and under his wings. Heartbroken, I protested, explaining that I had never witnessed Bink E deliberately pull out a single feather. My vet then asked, with a grin, if I ever slept. I was devastated, heartsick, and immediately wondered what I had done to harm my precious parrot companion.

After a thorough exam that included blood work, Dr. Galvin proclaimed Bink E healthy. He spent a great deal of time with me, discussing possible causes and cures as well as reiterating much of what I already knew about feather destruction, that is, that it can be quite difficult to discover the cause and even tougher to stop. In Bink E's case, giardia, skin disease (including dry skin), feather malformations and a host of other possible causes were ruled out. Food allergies were possible, but not suspected, given Bink E's history. Dr. Galvin explained that any of the known treatments are "hit and miss" and suggested that we try HCG* (a type of hormone injection). While he was unable to explain definitively why this treatment modality worked, he did say that it had been helpful in a high percentage of the cases he had treated. I nervously agreed to the injection, but after all the reading I had done and all the tales of woe I had heard, I was not terribly hopeful.

Over the next few weeks, I did my best to prevent Bink E from absorbing my stress by pretending that everything was perfect. There was no further feather loss, nor had I seen a single new pinfeather. We returned to the vet for a recheck after a month and Bink E got a second injection of HCG. After a second 30-day period, lo and behold, Bink E finally started looking like a pincushion. Whether the HCG had anything to do with his feathers starting to grow remains an unsolved mystery. However, I understand that the primary purpose of the HCG therapy was to curtail

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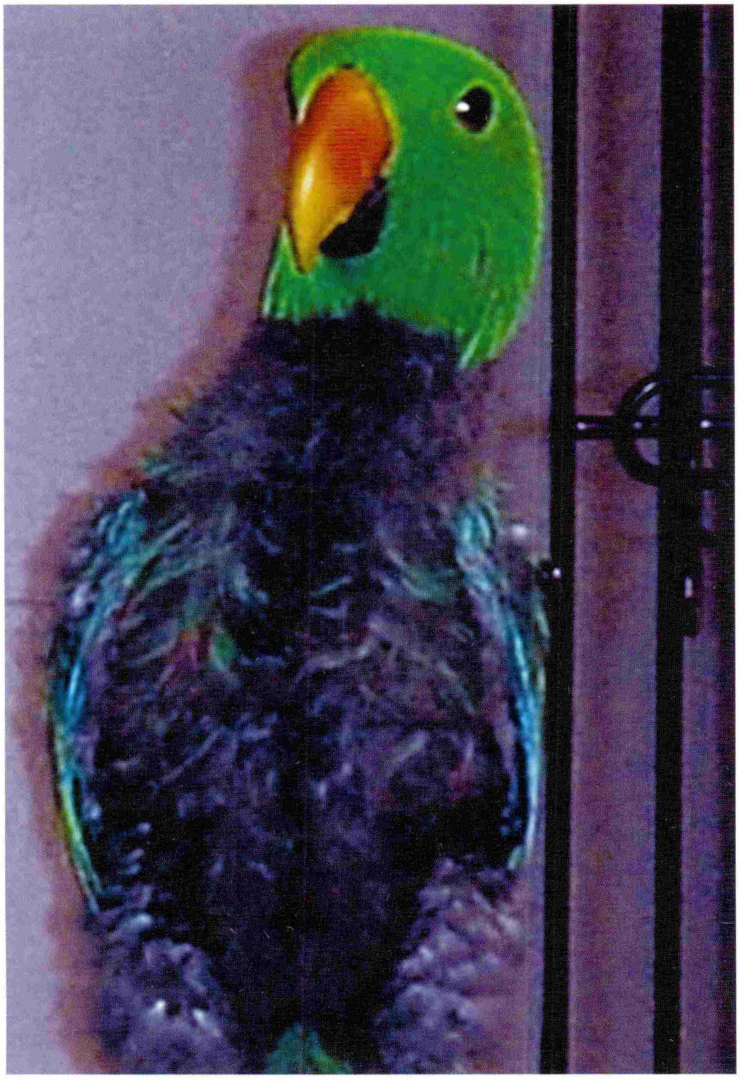
and/or prevent feather destruction. Since Bink E had stopped ripping out his feathers months earlier, I declined further treatment.

During this very frustrating time, I became hell bent on solving the mystery of why Bink E had destroyed his beautiful plumage. I carefully (and unceasingly) examined and re-examined Bink E's diet, environment, toys, and activities. I talked to anyone who would listen, including his breeders, other breeders, friends, and acquaintances, and read whatever material I could find that addressed the causes and treatments of feather destruction. No one was able to ascertain a definite cause and no one could offer an absolute solution. It had been months of endless frustration and maddening speculation. Anyone who has been through this problem with a beloved bird knows how distressing the process can be.

Finally, during the spring of 2002, Bink E was once again in full feather and looking great. During the many months that it took for his feathers to grow back, I never saw him pick, pluck, barber, or otherwise destroy a feather. I breathed a giant sigh of relief and hoped the problem was over.

Then, during late August or early September of 2002, I awoke one morning to find a rather large handful of small feathers on the floor of Bink's cage. I could not believe my



Bink E Berde was not "dressed to go out" during one of his high stress periods

Photos by Darla Mirabal

After a few years of much frustration, vet trips, and a lot of knowledge-seeking, Bink E finally has a new suite of fine feathers and he is his same old beautiful self!

eyes, which began to sting with the tears I was unable to hold back. This time, I knew we were not dealing with a normal molt. Within a very short time, Bink E Berde's beautiful turquoise shoulders were once again naked, his glorious green chest was grey, the feathers along the outside edges of his wings were methodically disappearing -- and I was heartbroken. Just as the year before, he seemed to be my same old cheerful, outgoing bird so I did the best I could to not let him see my concern and frustration.

Fortunately, during this second feather picking event, Bink E Berde's feathers started to grow back almost immediately. I never have figured out why he did not grow a single new feather in over four or five months during 2001. Some mysteries are never solved. On the positive side of things, as with the prior year, Bink E again allowed all of his new feathers to fully open. One thing was clear — his feather destruction was definitely a short-lived activity with long-term effects. At least an established pattern had emerged. My beautiful and much loved bird had become a seasonal feather picker.

Again during the second bout of feather destruction, I continued to research the mysteries of feather picking and whether or not it could be "cured." Again, I spoke with Dr. Galvin, breeders, friends, acquaintances, and anyone else that would listen. But this time I did not expect any answers, just a kind and concerned ear. Then one day, Steve Copeland (Bink E's very knowledgeable and concerned breeder) mentioned seasonal hormonal surges. Now that we were able to analyze an emerging pattern, the possible causes were narrowing. Nonetheless, I was a little surprised at a hormonal diagnosis because I had thought Bink E's needs had been addressed sufficiently with the addition of Bond E Berde to our family. Bond E is a generic species of stuffed parrot that Bink E had long ago adopted as his mate, feeding her first thing each morning and usually availing himself of conjugal visits with her several times a day.

Steve suggested that shortly before the arrival of Autumn 2003, I should institute a program of "change, change, change" for the Binkster, including varying cage locations, changing the time he spent in different cages (between his day cage and his sleep cage), switching out his toys at least once a week, and keeping him very busy. I did all of these things, including getting a new and larger sleep cage for Bink E. There was one other huge change. Late last fall, for a variety of reasons, I resigned from a very stressful job. I had begun to wonder about the effects of this stress on Bink E, who was a gift from my former employer. Bink E had been going to work with me from our very first days together. Because he had spent over five years at work with me without any feather-related problems, I had not given more than a passing thought to the effect of my job-related stress on my avian companion. In retrospect, however, I believe that the stress of the job, and especially my reaction to it, were key factors in the development of Bink E's feather picking.

My suspicion that on-the-job stress had played a major role in Bink E's problems was recently reinforced. About two months ago, I was doing some freelance work at a friend's law firm. Bink E was with me. Suddenly, someone frantically entered the room where I was working, with the same sort of stressed-out energy so often seen at my former job. Bink E reacted with a sudden, ear-ringing, siren-like alarm shriek and began to shout "NO! NO! NO!" After that, whenever Mr. Stress (who was functioning under an impossible deadline) wanted to enter the room, he stopped at the door, announced himself, and brought his energy level down a few pegs before entering. That put an immediate end to Bink E's screeching and cemented my realization that stress had played a greater role in all of this than I had known, or had been willing to admit.

It is now early December 2003 and I am overjoyed to report that Bink E Berde remains fully feathered. Earlier this autumn, I noticed a few feathers here and there, but I could tell from their intact feather shafts that they had molted out naturally. Even though my heart would skip a few beats every time I saw him preening, Bink E has not destroyed any feathers this year. So whether it was a seasonal hormonal surge, stress, all or none of these things that caused the feather destruction episode, there is hope. If your birds have been feather picking, plucking, or barbering and you have ruled out disease, diet, and environment as primary causes, do not give up! With love (and a little perseverance) all things are possible. Never stop trying — and remember that this complex and frustrating problem can, and sometimes does, turn around.

* Human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG), a polypeptide hormone produced by the human placenta, is composed of an alpha and a beta sub-unit. The alpha sub-unit is essentially identical to the alpha sub-units of the human pituitary gonadotropins, luteinizing hormone (LH) and follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), as well as to the alpha sub-unit of human thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH). The beta sub-units of these hormones differ in amino acid sequence. Chorionic gonadotropin is obtained from the human pregnancy urine. It is standardized by a biological assay procedure. ❖