

the Vet's Corner

by
Walter Roskopf, Jr., D.V.M.
and
Richard W. Woerpel, D.V.M.
Hawthorne, California

Symptomatology

In the last issue of WATCHBIRD, we discussed the fact that birds have the ability to physiologically compensate for illnesses for a surprisingly long period of time and that they tend to appear healthy during this period (sub-clinical illness). Because birds tend to hide their symptoms, it is imperative that we, as bird owners, learn how to recognize the clinical signs and symptoms of illness in our avian charges. We must learn how to recognize the early symptoms of disease (such as change in the bird's routine) and to avoid taking any symptoms for granted. Your avian veterinarian should be consulted as soon as possible after symptoms of illness are recognized and the bird should be subsequently examined. Promptness in securing veterinary assistance provides the best insurance for successful treatment and survival of the patient.

Symptomatology can best be discussed by dividing the topic into two parts: a discussion of those symptoms/clinical signs which are fairly obvious to the bird owner and a discussion of those symptoms/clinical signs which are not so obvious or easily detected.

Most bird owners would readily recognize



A sick lilac-crowned Amazon parrot. Note the fluffed, weak appearance.



A Mexican red-headed Amazon exhibiting eye involvement secondary to chronic sinus infection with *Pseudomonas* sp. and *Klebsiella* sp.



The budgie crouched low on the perch exhibits a typical posture of a bird with an injured leg or foot.

A yellow-naped Amazon parrot with severe respiratory disease. Note open-mouth breathing and posture of upper beak hooked upon the wire.



Photos by authors



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an inactive bird with closed eyes, fluffed feathers, droopy wings, and a low posture on the perch as an obviously ill bird. Such a bird will manifest weakness by first exhibiting equilibrium problems (rocking to and fro or appearing unsteady while at rest on its perch). This activity is eventually replaced by periodic episodes of falling off the perch, and finally, by occupance of the cage bottom. During this interval, the bird will usually cease to vocalize and may also stop eating. Remember, though, many seriously ill birds eat well right up to the time of death.

Audible and/or congested breathing, open mouth breathing, frequent sneezing, discharge from nostrils and/or eyes, and tail pumping (rhythmic back and forth movements of the tail as the bird breathes while at rest on its perch) are frequent and obvious clinical signs of respiratory illness. Swelling around the eyes or under the lower mandible are additional signs of respiratory disease.

A soiled or pasted vent always signifies a problem as healthy birds are absolutely fastidious. Although regurgitation of food is often indicative of amorous or courtship behavior, it (and/or vomiting) can also signify illness.

Integumentary (skin and feathers) abnormalities are readily noted by bird owners. Excessively dry and flaky skin, feather loss without subsequent feather replacement, incomplete maturation of new feathers, and feather picking may signify disease problems.

Lastly, hemorrhage from any body orifice or surface signals a problem and heralds an emergency situation. Bleeding birds require immediate veterinary attention. If this is not possible, the owner must arrest the bleeding himself by using direct pressure, heat or chemical (hemostatic liquids or powders) cautery, or attempt to induce blood clot formation using ordinary flour.

Not-so-obvious symptoms of illness in caged birds include: decreases in overall activity, preening activity, appetite, and vocalization; changes in water consumption and in the bird's routine (habits); and qualitative and/or quantitative changes in the droppings. Weight loss almost always accompanies illness in birds but it must be dramatic before most bird owners will recognize its presence. Recognition of swellings or enlargements is equally difficult unless they involve an extremity or the change in appearance of the bird produced is dramatic.

It cannot be over-emphasized that the bird owner must familiarize himself with the habits and routines of his birds in order to be able to detect subtle changes in them which may signify the onset of potentially serious disease. This early detection and prompt action are the keys to insuring that a sick individual will be successfully treated. ●