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Veterinary Viewpoints

Edited by

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian

All Pets Medical Center, West Hills, CA

Question #1: Several of my lutino cockatiels have feather loss on the back of their heads. Is this normal? These are pet birds that are all kept in one large cage.

M. Nichols, Texas

Answer #1: Most species of birds are not completely covered with feathers. The feathers lie in tracts with featherless areas between them. Cockatiels have a featherless area on the top of the head just behind their crest. When the crest is raised this area of skin is visible. It is more noticeable in lutino and albino birds. I suspect you are observing a normal situation. If you have any doubts, see your veterinarian.

James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA

Answer #2: Cockatiels, or any other birds for that matter, will squabble to establish a "pecking order" if their enclosure is not sufficiently large enough to accommodate what they would feel is their personal space. This problem is often manifested as feather loss from the head or back. However, you must differentiate this condition from a genetic "fault" seen in some lutino Cockatiels which is a "bald spot" on the back of their heads. The bald spot can range from small to quite large and may be easily visualized by erecting the crest. The difference between this balding and picking is that the truly balding bird will have

bare skin whereas the picked bird often has the tattered down remaining. There is nothing you can do if the fault is genetic balding, and this does not affect the health of the bird. If the feather loss is due to picking, then removing some of the birds from the cage and reducing the population may help.

Darrel K Styles, DVM
Dripping Springs, Texas

Answer #3: When one mentions feather loss on the back of the heads of lutino Cockatiels, two major possibilities come to mind. One would be a genetic tendency in many lutinos that involves the lack of feather tracts and hence, feathers, in this area. This is most noticeable when the bird raises its crest for a variety of reasons. The other major reason for feather loss on the back of a lutino cockatiel's head when there are multiple birds housed together, would be mutilation from another bird in the cage. This commonly occurs to females when a male wants to breed with her. In this common situation, in addition to the bald spot on the back of the head, the sides and top of the head may also be picked and show evidence of varying stages of balding.

Most likely from your description, you have the commonly visualized, genetically related, lutino Cockatiel back of the head balding scenario.

Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA

Question # 2: Several of my breeding pairs of birds have no feathers on the back of their heads. The best I can tell, it is the females. I assume that the males are picking their heads. These are Pionus, Cockatiels and lovebirds.

B. Price, Massachusetts

Answer #1: Feather picking by a mate is not uncommon. This is one form of "Hen Pecking," a term used for one bird abusing its mate. This can be the result of too small a cage, overcrowding, or a mismatched pairing of birds. There are other causes such as lack of a proper nest box or suitable nesting material. Consult with your veterinarian and consider an on-site visit by your veterinarian to evaluate your breeding facility.

*James M. Harris, DVM
Oakland, CA*

Answer #2: You do not mention the aviary setup in your question or how the birds are arranged. Are the pairs of breeding age, with each partner being sexually mature? Are they housed in small quarters with a high population density? There are many causes for feather loss but picking in psittacines is usually due to some stressor(s) in the environment

Try and eliminate some or all of the stressors if possible. First, make sure that the cage is of sufficient size for the species being bred and that there is only one pair per cage. Next, ensure that you have a "true" pair and the sexes are not mismatched. Birds should also be matched with their maturity conspecifics, meaning that the pair should be sexually mature in order to ensure that they will be synchronized in the breeding cycle. Older birds, due to frustration, will often abuse younger birds due to a lack of breeding readiness. Make sure the aviary is in a low traffic area to both people and pets. Reduce the population density of the aviary and if possible erect visual barriers between cages since some species are more territorial than others.

The species you mention, except for Pionus, are usually adapted to breeding in small cages and high pop-

ulation densities. So, there may be other reason(s) why the picking is occurring. It would be best to consult a good aviculturist in your area and have them review your aviary and breeding set-up. It appears that in your situation, the problem is husbandry related.

*Darrel K. Styles, DVM
Dripping Springs, Texas*

Answer #3: It is not uncommon in many species of captive psittacines, to observe feather picked heads in a pair or group of birds. It has been my experience that the feather picker is the male and the feather picked bird is the female. I suppose it can occur where the female picks the male, but I have not personally observed this behavior. As feather picking in birds appears to be a captive related behavior that is precipitated by stress, one can assume that there is some stress among birds that display this behavior. My impression has been that the male

is interested in breeding and the female is not. And, hence, the stressed male displays the behavior of picking the back of the female's head. Interestingly, this pattern of behavior most commonly is noted in the smaller species of birds, including canaries, and rarely occurs in the larger species of birds.

Often it can be noted in small species of psittacines, in particular with Cockatiels, where the adult birds will pick the backs of the heads of their growing offspring. This is thought to be an attempt to move them from the nest so that the pair can breed and raise another clutch.

Other than separating the two birds, I know of no solution for this captive induced behavior. I don't feel that it is medically detrimental to the birds but definitely is unsightly. Switching individuals in a pair may be helpful in some situations.

*Amy B. Worell, DVM, ABVP-Avian
West Hills, CA* ➔



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