

Every Good Bird Deserves Feather

The story of Pasha and a variable modality for feather restoration*

Text by Madeleine Franco
Photos by Mark Romansky

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I have two African Greys. I acquired Chloe, a 9-year old female, from a pet store, before I considered dealing directly with breeders. Chloe has never been an “only” bird. She is well-socialized, completely non-neurotic, and she allows other people, even non-members of the family to hold and pet her. She speaks occasionally, but always, appropriately. Her strong suit is imitating household noises, especially fax machines, phones, and microwave timers. She could so accurately replicate my cell phone ring that I had to change it. And, because we had so much construction in our neighborhood when she first began her repertoire, she’s a dead ringer for a back-up signal. Chloe is in perfect feather; I’ve never known her otherwise. Lucky me!

This is not an article about Chloe, however. I summarize Chloe’s attributes only to convey what had become my expectations. This is the story of Pasha that sets forth a re-feathering regimen. It is also a story of how expectations, even perhaps unrealistic ones, can help shape outcomes.

Pasha came into my life in February 2006. Surely it was fate. As much as I loved Chloe, I had no intention of acquiring another African Grey. Pasha was to be re-homed privately, not through any sanctioned adoption program. A friend was supposed to pick her up from her prior home, but when that friend was involved in a traffic accident en route to do just that, I was called upon to collect Pasha from the family who could no longer keep her. They were convinced she was unhappy, as evidenced by her withdrawal and her feather destructive behavior. The family’s lifestyle had changed somewhat and apparently Pasha no longer fit in as nicely as she had before. I was not judgmental. I was on assignment, pinch-hitting for a friend who had a history of helping birds in “situations.” Having re-feathered three birds already in the past year, I imagine my friend thought I was as good a choice as any to deal with Pasha, a bird that she had not yet seen.

When I arrived at the house, the woman greeted me cheerfully. She explained that Pasha, then approximately four years old, and at one time a great talker, had been the family’s darling. She had gone places and done things with them almost since they had bought her as a hand-fed baby. Pasha had even sat poolside eating fruit while they swam. She was definitely part of the family. According to the woman, their lives changed. The woman’s assessment was that Pasha was intelligent enough to notice the difference and she wasn’t adjusting well. This was the preamble; I had not yet seen the bird.

The living room of the house was essentially empty, except for a large cage draped with a sheet. I asked where Pasha was and the woman walked over to the cage and uncovered it. There, at last, was Pasha. I gasped audibly. I am sure I had anticipated a bird looking essentially like Chloe but with a few patches missing feathers here or there. Pasha was plucked unmercifully, more plucked than I had ever seen any bird before. What feathers she hadn’t plucked, she had snapped. Snapping her feathers, I was informed, was only a prelude to her pulling them out altogether. Some of the snapped feather shafts had coagulated blood on them. I approached the cage and Pasha began to fret terribly, then she fell off her perch. It was a long way down to the bottom of the cage and Pasha bounced when she hit the bottom. Several feather shafts began to bleed anew. I felt guilty for putting her through it and I apologized to my gracious and equally apologetic host.

The woman, perhaps reasoning that I had changed my mind, asked whether I would please take Pasha. She seemed under tremendous pressure to relieve herself of the bird, which had recently undergone numerous veterinary screenings, all being normal. She asked me whether I thought Pasha, who had plucked for over a year, would ever have feathers again. I said I didn’t know, because I honestly didn’t. She said she couldn’t bear seeing Pasha this way. My only response was that it was hard to blame

her. She was absolutely ready to relinquish the bird. I assured the woman that I would take good care of Pasha, as I wondered exactly what that meant. I promised her that regardless of the outcome on feather re-growth, Pasha would be loved in a forever home. What was I getting myself into? It was clear that Pasha had been loved very much at one time, but I sensed that the family was emotionally exhausted dealing with the pathetic creature that Pasha had become.

Pasha, who almost required me being sedated to remove her from her lair, came complete with that huge cage, a Manzanita play stand and more toys than the average four year-old human. I jammed everything into my vehicle, put Pasha on the front seat in a pet carrier and drove away. On the way home, I cried. But, through my tears I also promised Pasha that we were going to find her "inner bird." She looked at me through the grated door of the carrier as if she believed me. I resolved not to let her down. Pasha seemed like an otherwise good bird that deserved more. At the very least, she seemed to deserve feathers.

By the time I had driven the 15 miles home, I had already decided that the cage and play stand had to go. It seemed pointless to keep these items as daily reminders of how disabled Pasha had become. Both cage and play stand and all of Pasha unopened toys were delivered to the local bird club. First and foremost, Pasha needed a smaller cage, one in which she couldn't fall. I chose from my limited inventory a small, approximately 24"L x 15"H x 15H", cage that would fit on my kitchen counter. If Pasha and I were going to find that inner bird, we were going to spend a lot of time together looking for it and her cage had to be highly accessible and portable.

My first three re-feathering candidates had been cockatoos. They had been luxuriant at the outset compared to Pasha, who was little more than an egg-shaped ball of flesh, with head feathers only because she couldn't reach them. Her chest was bare, with not even down feathers to protect her when she fell. She had no flight feathers, only a few snapped and bloody shafts. Her keel bone was prominent, and the thin layer of skin covering it had bled when she had fallen

from her perch. Thankfully, the bone had not broken. I swore that fall would be her last, but I was wrong. As I was putting her in the cage I had prepared for her, Pasha fell again, this time off the kitchen counter and onto the tile floor. Again, she bounced, and she just got up and started walking away. Apparently, she was quite used to falling. I was determined to get her un-used to it.

I had not documented any of the previous re-featherings; but several friends, knowing of my success, had encouraged me to document the next one. Looking at Pasha, I feared there might not be a next one. I took a photo of Pasha—I was sure it wasn't a very good one—with the only camera I had handy, an off-brand disposable one. For the longest time, I couldn't bear to have the photo developed; I didn't want to look back, only forward. If I really had a re-feathering regimen, Pasha would certainly be the acid test.



Pasha after 10 days of being on the re-feathering regimen.

The regimen began on Day One. First, I gave Pasha a thorough bath in the sink with tepid water. I had to remove as much of the superficial blood as I could without causing more bleeding. I was told that Pasha hated baths and she did, so I hurried through it. However, I was anxious to see exactly what I was up against.

I started Pasha on Bach Rescue Remedy® 1 immediately, administered in her drinking water. The next morning and for at least 60 mornings thereafter, I sprayed Pasha with a dilute solution of blue Listerine® 2 (2 tbsp. to 1 quart), administered as a very light mist from a quart spray bottle, carefully avoiding the bird's eyes. This was followed by a soaking spray of dilute solution of Aloe vera gel (2 tbsp. to 1 quart), also administered from another spray bottle. Pasha would then sit in her cage in a sunny spot across the room for an hour or two while I ate breakfast, watched the morning news and planned my work day. Her drinking water, always containing Rescue Remedy, was changed daily. Our household water contains neither chlorine nor water softening agent, and salt-free, non-chlorinated water is recommended in this topical regimen.

On Day Three I thought I saw some little fringes of feathers emerging from the margins of Pasha's wings, just below her shoulders. By Day Five I knew that

those little fringes were, in fact, the beginning of her recovery. I tried not to show my excitement, but I talked to Pasha often and sometimes allowed her to look at her image in the mirror as I gave her pep talks and told her how beautiful she was becoming. I know she recognized herself as “that birdie in the window.” Though we hate to anthropomorphize, I wanted Pasha to be able to document her own improvement along with me.

Pasha also had what I would consider a marginal diet. Though her prior owner had said she was a good eater, Pasha didn't seem to like anything but seeds and kibble and an occasional piece of apple or carrot. I set about trying to change that by eliminating processed corn products, in the event she might be allergic, replacing them with rice and vegetables or birdie omelets made with frozen mixed vegetables and bread crumbs. I kept giving her a quality seed mixture, the same one I was feeding my other birds. She took to the new seed mixture almost instantly, but it was a struggle to get her to eat vegetables. I kept offering and she kept abstaining. Finally, Pasha chose to broaden her epicurean horizons one day when I offered her sweet potato French toast. After that, for some reason, the other offerings also became more acceptable to her.

The perches in Pasha's cage were placed only one inch above the cage floor. Gradually I introduced a sleeping perch that I placed several inches above the bottom grate. At least several times, friends commented that Pasha seemed to be in a cage that was far too small for her. I endured the criticism, knowing that it was vastly more important for Pasha to master her environment in increments than it was for her to have a large cage in which she would surely fall. I gave Pasha

only two simple toys in her cage. She had relatively little space to get involved with toys and athletic toys that she could hang from and likely fall from were strictly off limits. Her toys consisted of a small wiffle ball and a beaded millet holder with a bell. Stark as her cage was, surely Pasha seemed much more in need of healing than she was in need of playing.

To take her focus off feather snapping, I introduced Pasha to pine cones. One of my other former pluckers (now a total cure) had taught me all about pine cones as favorite friends to preen and sculpt. The sound and tactile sensation of breaking a pine cone bract is not unlike snapping a feather (I have actually tried this). For that reason,

the pine cones, pretreated in a dilute solution of bleach (1 cup to a kitchen sink full of water) and sun dried, served as an excellent distraction from feather destructive behavior. At first Pasha was afraid of the

pine cones and then she became aggressive and destructive with them. Finally, after several weeks, she became a virtuosa stylist. As important as they seem to be as a therapy, pine cones are a staple in my household and I don't dare run out of them. Having seen other members of my flock respond well to music, I also exposed Pasha to a lot of soft rock, new age, and piano music, the latter being sometimes live. I don't play, but my partner does.

After 60 days of intensive treatment with the Listerine and aloe solutions, we gradually reduced the topical treatments to three times, then twice, then only once a week. Pasha is not in perfect feather yet, but she is well on her way. She just can't seem to get those tail feathers right yet, but each one that grows back in is more brilliant

and robust than the last. Even now and probably for the rest of her life, Pasha still gets frequent soaking and spray baths. When she has nervous episodes,



Five weeks after arrival. Pasha has re-grown some tail feathers, flight feathers and contour feathers.



5 1/2 months after beginning the re-feathering regimen, Pasha has almost completely re-grown her feathers.

which are now seldom, I give her Rescue Remedy. After spending nearly six months in a small cage that was right-sized for her and enjoying outings only long enough to socialize her, she is finally housed in a cage identical to Chloe's in a humidified bird room with the rest of the flock, right beside Chloe. They do seem to enjoy each others' company.

Possibly as a result of observing Chloe, who is a great eater (though a bit of a carbo queen) Pasha has improved her eating habits considerably. In fact, I can always count on her to eat every last vegetable and every scrap of French toast. During supervised out-of-cage play time, Pasha seems to favor Chloe, the smaller Amazons and a caique, deferring only to the caique. She is occasionally allowed to swing on a wooden swing hanging from a large communal Manzanita play stand in the middle of the bird room. I still worry that she might fall, but now she has flight feathers and can easily stage a soft landing. Several weeks ago, Pasha began spending time outdoors in a large sheltered cage with some of the more mild-mannered birds. She has become an integral member of the flock and a great pet once again. She talks, she laughs, and she carries on one-sided cell phone conversations after replicating the ring. Talk about a dead ringer! Most of those conversations begin with, "Hello . . . gimme a minute . . .," a phrase that I am sure she had learned in her previous home. From all indications, Pasha is happy and I believe she knows she is loved, not only by humans, but also by her bird buddies. Indeed, through much hard work and great expectations, we have found her inner bird.

Several people have asked me about the reasoning behind this regimen of mine that has worked with now five birds and assumed an almost religious discipline with Pasha. As "unscientific" as it probably is, the regimen takes into consideration physiological,

psychological and dietary factors that may contribute to feather destructive behavior. The Listerine solution, while also providing some analgesic relief from possible inflammatory skin disease, is intended to

eliminate any harmful bacteria or possible feather fungus, while the aloe solution helps keep the skin moist and supple and the emerging feathers lubricated. The elimination of processed corn products is based on possible allergy. And, while the Rescue Remedy seems to have a calming effect, the pine cones provide entertainment and distraction. Additionally, the special attention that Pasha was shown throughout the regimen may have been just as important as any of the rest of it.



Almost 9 months after her arrival, Pasha once again resembles a normal African Grey Parrot, complete with red tail.

Some ask if I know what specific part of the regimen is actually most effective, and do I hypothesize which part(s) of it might be discarded. No, I do not. From my own perspective, it all works together, but I am not sure I care to prove or disprove that. Please don't fault me for this, for I am no scientist. I don't even know for sure how or why the regimen is supposed to work in theory. I only know that it has worked in practice. Five times . . . and counting!



Pinecones in the various stages of "grooming".



"Tools of the trade". These items are essential for the re-feathering regimen.

Early in the process, I asked my friend Mark, who never doubted for a minute that miracles are possible, to help me document this process in photos. He seemed delighted to be included in the transformation of Pasha and happily took photos every several weeks throughout a nearly six-month period. Though Mark's belief is hard to quantify, his photos are worth at least a thousand words. ♦

*not her real name

- 1 - Rescue Remedy(R) is a trademark of Bach Flower Remedies Ltd, Oxfordshire, England
- 2 - Listerine(R) is a trademark of Warner-Lambert, a division of Pfizer Inc.

Madeleine Franco is president of the Las Vegas Avicultural Society and vice president of the Wasatch Avian Education Society (Utah). She is an award-winning business writer and a dedicated avian hobbyist/ aviculturist with a homogeneous and platonic flock of over two dozen exotic pet parrots.