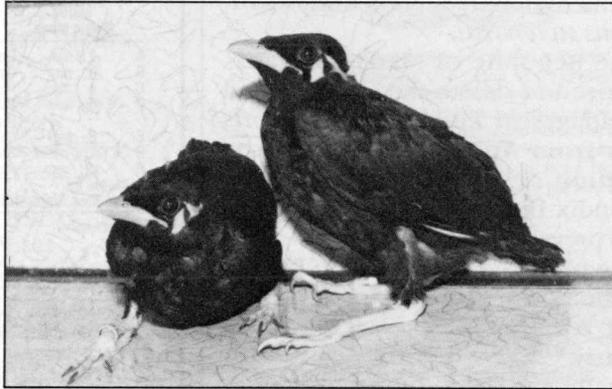


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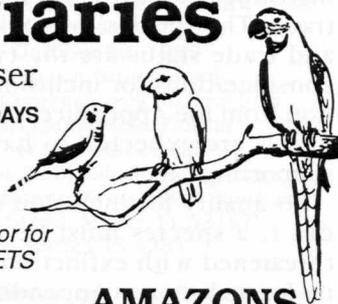
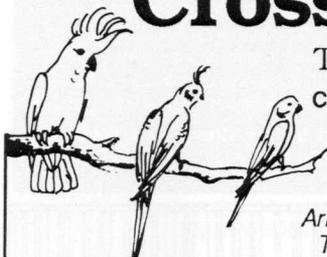
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## Veterinary Viewpoints

edited by Amy Worell, D.V.M.  
Woodland Hills, California

**Question:** I have a Moluccan Cuckoo as a pet. I have had him examined by an avian veterinarian because he is a feather picker. The findings were that he is a psychotic feather picker. He is a healthy bird otherwise.

He started to pick his feathers after I bought him. I love this bird and want to do all I can for him. What can I do about this feather picking?

J. Morgan, Texas

**Answer 1:** Feathers are highly specialized structures covering birds. As reptiles evolved and changed from cold-blooded creatures having the same body temperature as their environment to warm-blooded creatures able to produce heat and gain independence from their environmental temperature, there was a need to conserve heat. To do so, the scales of reptiles changed to form the variety of feathers we know today. Feathers have a variety of functions: heat conservation, waterproofing, protection from trauma, display, and flight to name a few. The various functions of feathers are dependent on their structure and position. Feathers wear out, and since they do not continuously grow as in the case with hair, they are replaced periodically. The process is called moult.

To maintain normal structure and position and to assist new feathers to free themselves from their protective sheaths, birds groom. This activity is called preening. Normally birds spend up to 25% of their waking hours

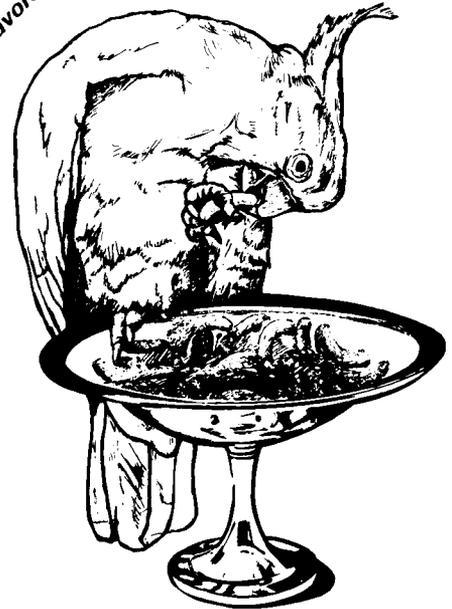
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preening. As is the case with any particular activity within a group of individuals, there is a wide variation in the time spent on this activity by various individuals. Some birds rarely preen, thus their feather coats always have a disheveled appearance. Most birds, however, spend a reasonable amount of their time preening and have well manicured, properly arranged feathers. Some birds preen excessively thereby damaging and/or destroying their feathers in the process.

In addition to preening, birds in the wild spend a considerable amount of their waking hours seeking and consuming food. This may account for up to 60% of their daytime activity. Quite a bit of time is also spent interacting with their fellow flockmates. It is no wonder, then, that the captive, caged bird with limited social interactions, with provision of all food supply, often occupies its time by excessively preening its feathers. There certainly are medical reasons for excessive preening resulting in feather picking or chewing and a thorough work-up by a veterinarian is needed to confirm or rule out these causes. Infections, internal and external parasites and a number of other physical causes producing pruritis (itching) or pain can result in the bird's feather destructive activity.

By and large, though, the bulk of feather picking activity is psychogenic in origin. Isolation, boredom, and loneliness contribute to the problem. Since preening in reasonable amounts is a normal daily activity in the bird's life, once excessive preening is estab-



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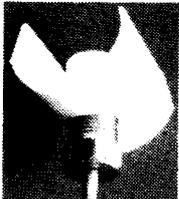
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lished it can be very difficult to modify and/or change.

Excessive preening is often controlled by restraint devices such as collars. The collars mechanically prevent the bird from reaching its feathers, but their use alone even for extended periods is rarely curative unless efforts are made to redirect the bird's attention and activity. Without these behavioral and/or environmental modifications, the newly replaced feathers will be quickly mutilated or pulled when the collar is removed.

Nature has provided birds with an amazing organ, the beak. In the case of psittacines, the beak can hold and explore objects with great gentleness and at the same time, pry, crack, split, crush, grind, and tear. Some species, such as cockatoos, are particularly active with their beaks. Providing them with soft 2" by 4" pine perches allows them to spend hours splintering the wood, satisfying their needs and at the same time distracting them from over-preening.

Toys can also be used as diversions. They should be non-toxic, durable, changed often and are most successful when so constructed that the bird is kept frustrated trying to move, dismantle or manipulate its structure. Food items can also occupy birds. Nuts need to be opened and varieties of fruits, vegetables and other foods allow the bird to spend time exploring its diet.

The environment can serve as a diversion. This can be especially helpful for solitary birds that are without company for extended periods of time. Both visual and auditory diversions can be used. Move the bird's cage near the window allowing access to the view. (Avoid direct sun!) Keep the television on during the day or leave a radio on while away.

A bird companion or mate is sometimes helpful. A companion can be caged separately or with the feather picker. In the case of a mate, one must be aware of the potential of pairing birds. An overly aggressive bird paired with a passive bird may result in severe trauma to one of the birds.

Psychological feather picking has its onset at a time of household disruption or change. Family members starting to work, school, moving away, moving in or household disruption such as remodeling can set off feather destructive activity. Plan ahead. If changes are anticipated, take measures to pre-occupy the bird. It is easier to prevent this problem than it is to correct it. If corrective measures need to be taken,

consider instituting a number of actions at the same time rather than single measures.

James M. Harris, DVM  
 Oakland, California

**Answer 2:** Birds are unique creatures amongst the members of the animal kingdom. Feathers are only one of the unique anatomical adaptations that have been developed in birds to help them survive in the world. In the wild state, the bird is a beautiful, full feathered bundle of motion. In the captive state, self-mutilation of these beautiful feathers is commonplace in certain species. Within the bird kingdom, psittacines appear to stand alone in their multifactorial quest to destroy their beauty through the destruction of their feathers.

The potential reasons for self-mutilation of the feathers are many, and the list of potential solutions is even longer, reflecting on the frustrating nature of the problem. By definition, feather picking or self-mutilation of feathers is an abnormal condition in which the bird destructively mutilates or removes its feathers. It can progress to severe skin mutilation or be mild, affecting only a certain area of the bird's body. Often, the whole body may be devoid of all but the down feathers and those covering the head and neck region. These areas are, of course, unreachable by the bird's inquisitive beak.

The reasons for self-inflicted feather removal or destruction vary greatly with the individual bird, although certain generalities can be made. Often, more than one factor may be involved, and the initial cause for the behavior may have long been forgotten by the bird. The behavior may have become a ritualistic part of the bird's daily behavior, possibly more like a habit in nature.

In general, stress, either experienced intrinsically and/or extrinsically, appears to be the basis for most potential causes. And, of course, what is perceived as stressful to the bird may not appear so to its human caretakers. Potential stress induced factors include: nutritional deficiencies; abnormal moult or a pruritis (itching) associated with the moult; systemic (involving the whole body) or localized infections; growths that irritate the bird; changes in the hormonal levels (such as sex hormones); related to nervousness, jealousy, or emotional disturbances; related to boredom, inactivity or used as an attention getting

device; exaggerated or excessive preening behavior; related to brain or neuronal chemical imbalances; presence of external parasites; environmental conditions such as change in season; social interactions or lack of, with other birds, family members, or pets.

As is apparent, the potential causes for feather picking or mutilation can be numerous. Thus, a simple cure is not often readily available. Ideally, if a specific reason for the feather picking can be identified, a more appropriate treatment regime can be initiated, which basically involves eliminating the cause. More commonly, though, no specific cause can be identified and thus treatment may be difficult and unrewarding for all concerned.

A diagnostic workup, including a blood panel, choanal and cloacal cultures, a psittacosis test, and a fecal examination for the presence of internal parasites should accompany a physical exam of the patient. Additional diagnostic tests such as whole body radiographs, skin scrapings, and feather follicle cultures may be recommended.

In those cases where no specific cause has been identified, the bird's nutritional status and environmental situation should be reviewed. If the diet is deemed adequate, then certain environmental changes might be tried. These changes might involve addition of playthings or toys, moving the cage to an area of either more or less activity or by a window, purchase of a larger, more spacious cage, additional playtime and social interaction with the owner or other birds, addition of another bird or mate, addition of the radio or television when the owner is not present, and bi-weekly misting or showering of the bird.

Additional potential treatments involve the use of medications such as repository hormones, sedatives, or drugs to change the balance of chemical transmitters in the brain.

Occasionally, the addition of a small amount of sea salt to the bird's diet may decrease feather picking, as may the use of collars.

As one can see, this common problem has many interesting facets which influence the potential cause and treatment of the feather picking bird. Many birds will continue feather picking no matter what avenues of treatment are tried and this thought should be kept in mind when approaching a non-responsive feather picking bird.

Amy Worell, DVM  
Woodland Hills, California ●

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