

Feather Picking

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During consultations and seminars, I am often asked to provide a solution for feather plucking problems in companion parrots. I can share helpful information but absolute solutions are usually difficult. Parrots rarely indulge in feather destructive behavior for just one reason. There are probably as many complexities to feather picking as there are parrots who pick. To some degree, different species of parrots may have diverse causative factors that influence feather problems and certainly the age that picking starts has a great deal to do with its reasons. I believe it is absolutely essential that parrots who have started plucking be seen by a knowledgeable avian veterinarian as soon as possible. Even if the test results show a physical health problem, I encourage parrot owners to optimize their parrot's environment. This includes a discussion about proper diet, frequent showering, good lighting, cage size and the necessities of play and exercise. Improving basic care is always an important step with any health problem whether it is physical or emotional.

Parrots evolved in an environment vastly different than what we can possibly provide for them. Many pressures, both physical and emotional, play a role in feather picking. Some theories about this topic are far too simplistic as most feather problems have a combination of influences. For example the rampant over-generalization that plucking is caused simply by sexual frustration is absolute nonsense. While actual sexual frustration may play some role in feather picking that begins in mature birds, the vast majority of companion parrots who pluck exhibit aspects of this behavior as young birds long before sexual factors exert an influence. Many of the parrots who develop behavioral picking patterns have been poorly socialized, have experienced few rules and little guidance, exhibit some phobic behaviors, and are overdependent on their human owners. While reaching sexual maturity may exacerbate problems that already exist in a companion parrot, it is rarely the primary cause of such problems. It is unusual for serious feather destructive behavior to occur in well-nurtured parrots who experience optimal care and have been raised with rules and guidance.

I believe that the initial cause of a great deal of picking, especially in hand-fed domestic birds, is physical with behavior playing a part in its continuation. Physical causes can include disease, traumatic injury, malnutrition, poor physical care, allergies, and/or a substandard environment. Allergies and severe stress may also result in feather picking episodes. Several clients of mine have parrots that started picking after earthquakes and severe storms. Interestingly enough, in many cases it did not appear to be the actual stress of the earthquake that caused the plucking. The continual stress of aftershocks was the factor to many birds. Parrots have encapsulated nerve bundles in their leg joints that seem to act as vibration detectors. Consequently they are highly sensitive to vibration. I know of parrots who started plucking when their owners moved to downstairs apartments or next to a freeway. Parrots are also highly empathic picking up their owner's energy in times of stress.

Allergies, including food allergies, household dust, and seasonal allergies to pollen or mold spores may be a cause of picking in some birds. Food allergies may also be a significant factor. I personally question the use of some food additives, particularly artificial food coloring, in the manufacture of pelleted diets and won't feed them to my birds. Some birds may have negative physical reactions to components in other foods and dietary supplements. It is however, difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of food related allergies.

Airborne pollutants can also be a problem. It is not natural for parrots to be confined to a situation where they have to breathe the residue of their droppings, food waste, or feather dust. Household pollutants of many kinds may play a significant role in feather picking problems. Cigarette smoke can be particularly damaging to a bird's sensitive respiratory system and physical contact with nicotine on an owner's fingers or hands can cause serious skin reactions. Problems caused by cigarettes due to breathing the toxic smoke, filthy feathers and physical nicotine contact reactions, could be a major factor in many cases of skin and feather problems.

Injury Or Trauma

Any physical injury is likely to cause a bird to bother its feathers in the area of the trauma. This is actually a frequent cause for the onset of feather picking in many birds. However, the majority of birds who began local plucking of an injured area will rarely continue picking unless other factors are involved. Although I generally do not think collars are helpful in stopping habitual plucking, they can be useful in keeping a bird from bothering an injury while it heals. The success of collars from a behavioral point of view depends a great deal on whether or not the parrot accepts wearing one. Some birds adjust quickly with little trauma while others suffer problems that may be more serious than the picking when forced to wear a collar.

One of the major causes of injury plucking in young birds is a fall in the cage which often ends up in a thrashing episode. Young parrots fall in or off of their cages for a variety of reasons, most of which are preventable. Trimming the toenails too short before the balance skills are developed can be one contributory factor. Many young birds, particularly greys, are clumsy and need special considerations until they develop their balance skills. Parrots who would normally be fledging and taking their first flights should never be allowed on top of their cages or other high places if their wings are trimmed. It seems to be instinctive for birds at this stage to fly when startled or excited and a bird who can not fly may end up seriously injured. If a young bird falls onto the tips of his long shafted wing or tail feathers, they can be jammed up into the follicles creating bruising. This type of injury can cause a bird to bother the feathers excessively, often resulting in their destruction. An all too common injury occurs when a young grey leaps from the cage or play gym top and plummets to the ground like a lead balloon landing off balance on their breastbone, splitting the skin.

In the wild, young parrots who are startled or become afraid either hide or fly away from the situation -- usually with the guidance of their parents. In captivity, a bird may instinctively attempt to fly but, instead, will end up crashing into their cage, tangling their wings and tails in the cage bars and grate. For this reason, it is important that the cage bar spacing be appropriate for the size of the bird. If the bars are too wide, it is possible for a wing to become twisted between them causing more serious injury. Grates in the bottom of the cage are particularly dangerous at this time. I highly recommend removing them or padding the bottom of the cage to prevent injury to a bappy who has not developed his cages smarts yet.

Too severe a wing trim seems to also be a physical cause of feather picking. Of course, having clipped wings is a totally unnatural situation for any bird. This does not mean we should not trim our parrots' wings, it means we should take care in the way they are trimmed. I have particularly observed parrots who begin to bother their feathers when the flights have been trimmed too close to the follicle (up under the coverts) or when the secondaries close to the body have been cut.

The Two Major Physical Causes Of Plucking?

I believe, after talking to hundreds of owners who own plucking birds, that two of the major **physical** causes are still inadequate diet and not enough humidity and/or baths. Calcium and vitamin A deficiencies are still a serious health problem in parrots who are fed a primarily seed diet or too much human junk food. These two nutrients are essential for the proper growth and condition of tissue, skin, and feathers. Converting birds to a quality pelleted diet and/or feeding healthy human foods with supplementation for a balanced diet can make a vast difference in skin and feather quality. With the knowledge we have now about proper avian nutrition there is absolutely no excuse for feeding a predominantly seed diet. It is nutritional abuse and anyone who tells you otherwise is ignorant of the facts. Pet stores that still wean babies to a seed-only diet or recommend seed as a total diet can only be motivated by greed and/or sloth since the profit margin on seed is greater than just about any other bird-related product. It is possible to convert any bird to a better diet with patience and the right information.

Year round daily misting with plain water plus a once a week drenching (not drowning) are essential for parrot's respiratory health and feather condition. In most areas of North America, we set our thermostats high in the winter and most heating systems dry the air considerably. When the air becomes so dry, we may get all sorts of symptoms including dry skin and nosebleeds. The same drying of the skin and mucous membranes occur with parrots causing them a host of health problems. Some parrots seem to be seasonal pickers, plucking only during the winter when the artificial heat dries them up like little raisins. A "real" bath with detergent may be necessary only if a bird's feathers become severely soiled or greasy for some reason. The soap is rinsed from the feathers. Owners and veterinarians should consider the possibility of a contaminant on the feathers before starting extensive drug therapies.

We all know birds should have good lighting, however, that can mean different things to different people. Many of the homes I have been in do not have sufficient lighting for the birds. Even a bird who is next to a window probably does not have adequate light. Our eyes quickly adjust to the level of light in our houses and we may think it is good enough for the birds. Not only is it humid in the equatorial rainforest, the light is also intense. It is amazing what a difference proper lighting can make in the condition of our captive parrots.

Learning The Wrong Techniques

In thinking about the myriad of causes for feather destructive behavior, I have wondered about some interesting possibilities. It is obvious to me that many parrot behaviors are a complex combination of instinct and learning. While flying may be innate, the finesse of flying may depend on parental teaching or example. Eating is an essential behavior but how to eat, what to eat, and where to eat seem to be learned behaviors in parrots. The same thing may be true of preening.

Cleaning and "re-zipping" ruffled feathers is no doubt an instinctive behavior, but the finesse of preening may be learned by young birds observing their parents. If this is true, at least some of the overpreening and feather problems we see in young companion parrots may be related to them not learning proper preening techniques or learning by watching the wrong species. Observing various parrot species preen makes it obvious that some species have subtle differences in their preening techniques that probably correspond with differences in their feather structure. For example, there is a significant difference in the feather structure of Eclectus, cockatoos, and Amazons. Is a young cockatoo that watches too many Amazons preen more likely to overpreen or pick its feathers? Even the possibility that this may be a consideration creates many questions. For example, how can a human teach a parrot to preen properly? Do baby parrots need to watch adults of the same species to learn their proper preening techniques?

Perhaps this is just an exercise in thinking aloud but as someone who spends a great deal of time puzzling about parrot behavior, I often have more questions than answers. Hopefully as we know more about these complex beings, we will find some of the important answers. Any thoughts on this topic are welcome from readers.

Monkey see, monkey do. Parrots do not just mimic vocalizations, they also emulate body language and behaviors. Young parrots clearly learn from the example of others and even older birds may take up habits they see exhibited in other birds. Consequently, there is no doubt in my mind that some parrots start picking their feathers after watching other parrots pick. As I stated before, finding a mate for a plucking parrot often results in that parrot plucking its mate or teaching its new mate to pluck. behavioral Considerations In Picking

In most cases feather picking is caused by a complex combination of physical and behavioral causes. Since I believe a great deal of plucking starts for physical reasons, I encourage a full veterinarian work-up at the onset of the problem. The presumption should not be made that the problem is simply behavioral. However, even if picking starts for a purely physical reason, behavior complexities can continue the plucking beyond the resolution of the physical cause. The primary behavioral influence is attention paid to the bird when it is picking. Parrots can be incredibly behavior. A bird who starts plucking because of a simple insect bite may develop a habitual pattern if the owner pays attention to it every time it messes with its feathers. While picking birds certainly need nurturing and attention from their owners to feel secure, it is important **not** to give them that attention around their picking behavior.

Gradual change by itself should not cause enough of a trauma to start a feather picking episode. However, parrots who have been overprotected and poorly socialized may not react well to any new situation, especially if it happens suddenly. If the change seriously threatens the bird's sense of security, phobic behavior may result in feather mutilation. In young parrots, traumatic or aggressive handling can also be a factor in picking. It is important to protect any young bird from any threatening experience. Some people drive their parrots crazy. Teasing, aggressive behavior, continual confrontation, or constant arguing from humans can cause insecurity in parrots that could lead to picking. Our major goal for our parrots should be to help them be secure in our homes.

Poor Early Socialization

Parrots are intelligent animals and much of their behavior is learned. Early socialization is not simply the number of people (or birds) that a young bird comes into contact with. It is the process by which they learn their social and survival skills. Basically, parrots do not automatically know how to adapt to their life in a living room. We need to teach them how to be good pets. If we don't guide their behavior from the time they would naturally start exploring their environment, parrots raised for the pet trade can begin to show serious behavioral dysfunction. These problems are rarely apparent until the young birds start to reach their independence stages. One of the manifestations of this behavioral confusion can be feather picking. It appears that most plucking related to poor early socialization will start by the time a parrot is 2 years old.

The majority of people who consult with me are under the erroneous presumption that their parrots must be unhappy if they pick. This is not necessarily true. I know of many contented parrots that play happily, love to be cuddled, chatter loquaciously, and pick their feathers. The most important advice I can give the owners of plucking birds, whether it is from physical or behavioral causes (or both), is to totally ignore their bird when it picks. Give him lots of love and nurturing attention but ignore the picking. Parrots can be highly manipulative and if they receive attention for a behavior, they will continue it for attention as long as we give them an investment in it.

Fussing over a parrot when it picks is almost a guarantee that the behavior will become a habit.

As with all behavioral problems, treating the symptoms is less effective than solving the underlying cause. The underlying cause of most behavioral problems in companion parrots is a confused bird in control of his own life doing a miserable job of it. With very confused or phobic birds who pluck, working to increase their sense of security is essential. Giving clear messages with verbal commands and defining periods of attention and cage time-outs will help develop a sense of independence in spoiled birds. Protecting a parrot from traumatic experiences is essential, however, over-protected parrots who have not been introduced to change in safe, secure ways are often feather pickers. Gradually setting rules, providing behavioral guidance, and teaching a bird to accept change and new adventures under close supervision is imperative to their well-being. Working with behavioral pickers will usually make a significant difference but may never completely prevent future episodic picking during times of confusion and stress. [The Pet Bird Report](#) has published several articles that will help you understand Nurturing Guidance and the socialization process. (To order, please send a SASE to PBR Reprints, 2236 Mariner Square Dr #35, Alameda, CA 94501).