



THE CENTER FOR

BIRD & EXOTIC ANIMAL MEDICINE

Feather Plucking and Self-Mutilation in Pet Birds

Feather plucking and mutilation is one of the most frustrating problems in pet bird medicine. Damage to feathers can range from feather shredding to the removal of most or all feathers within the bird's reach, or even the mutilation of skin or muscle tissue. The causes are complex and probably multi-factorial which often makes control difficult.

Under normal conditions birds will spend large amounts of their waking hours grooming or preening each individual feather. Since feathers serve a variety of important functions, proper feather care is essential for good health. Old, worn feathers are replaced by new ones during the normal molting process. Each feather is replaced at a minimum once yearly. The molt can be light, in which only a few feathers are lost and replaced at a time, to heavy, involving a larger number of feathers. At no time during a normal molt will the bird appear bare or have bare patches. In contrast, a feather plucking bird can be bare or have damaged feathers anywhere the bird's beak can reach them.

The degree of damage to feathers and skin is variable. In the least severe cases birds may shred their tails or the tips of wing feathers cut during a normal grooming, or pull out a few outer feathers revealing fluffy down feathers beneath. Some birds deftly remove the vane portion of the feather leaving just the shaft. In more severe cases birds pull out more feathers sometimes to the point where the bird is completely bare except for the normal appearing feathers of the head, where the bird can't reach. In the most severe cases birds bite at skin and muscle, sometimes leaving life threatening wounds. Birds that are shredders or mild pluckers do not necessarily progress to severe plucking. Some vary the amount of damage they do over time, and some stop spontaneously and never pluck again.

Causes of Feather Plucking and Mutilation

Numerous medical and psychological problems have been cited as possible causes. In reality there may be a host of complex factors interacting to produce this behavior. *It is important that the first step be a complete medical work up to rule out disease.* Any medical problem from malnutrition or a simple bacterial infection to advanced Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease can be involved. Some diseases produce direct damage to the feathers, while others they cause the bird to pluck or mutilate out of discomfort or frustration. In many cases the correction of an underlying medical problem can lead to the discontinuation of plucking behavior. Low humidity, infrequent bathing, cigarette smoke, inhalant and food allergies have also been suggested as causes of plucking behavior

In many plucking birds a medical problem cannot be identified. In these cases the problem may be from boredom, sexual frustration, fear, a sudden change in the bird's routine or environment, or a host of other suspected causes. In these cases, identification and correction of the problem (if

possible or practical) can help.

Treating Feather Plucking and Mutilation

As mentioned above, appropriate treatment of existing medical problems may control plucking. Increasing the amount of time spent with the bird, removing sources of stress or fear and providing toys and other stimulation may help other birds. Birds plucking out of sexual frustration may benefit from being paired with a mate. Careful observation and consultation with persons knowledgeable about bird behavior is extremely helpful.

Birds that shred the ends of feathers cut after a routine groom often cease shredding when the feathers are allowed to grow out. This must be weighed against the disadvantages and dangers of allowing pet birds full flight in the house.

Therapies that are not considered useful are Elizabethan collars or neck braces designed to keep feathers out of reach. (These are essential, however, when birds are severely mutilating skin and muscle tissue). These devices help feathers regrow, but only worsen the bird's mental health. Bitter tasting sprays only tend to call more attention to feathers. Yelling or punishing a plucking bird teaches it that plucking gets the owner's attention.

Newer therapies for psychological feather plucking include antipsychotic or antidepressant drugs such as Haldol or Prozac. These drugs have been extremely helpful in some cases but are only used when medical and behavioral therapies are unsuccessful and the level of plucking or mutilation is unacceptable.

Some cases of plucking and mutilation do not respond to any form of treatment. Over time, severe feather plucking may damage feather follicles to the point feathers can never regrow. In these cases owners must often learn to live with the bird as is or attempt to place it in a breeding situation, which can be a difficult decision for a devoted pet owner.