



Chastain Veterinary Medical Group Pet Health Fact Sheet

Feather Picking in Companion Birds

Introduction

Feather picking is one of the most frustrating problems confronting a bird owner. Few things could be more horrifying to a bird owner than to discover the bottom of their bird naked and the bottom of the enclosure filled with feathers. Such a discovery usually triggers many questions: What caused this? What am I doing wrong? Is my bird in pain? How can I make him/her stop?

Well, to begin, realize that birds spend a large portion of their day grooming their feathers. This is called *preening* and it is natural, normal, and instinctive. Given their importance for flight and insulation, feathers are absolutely essential to a bird's way of life. Birds in the wild spare no expense to keep their feathers in absolutely pristine condition.

With that in mind, it is easy to see why feather picking is considered part of a *behavioral continuum* that ranges from normal preening, to over-preening, to feather picking, and finally to self mutilation.

Over-preening or feather picking occurs when normal feather maintenance is carried to pathologic extremes. Most experts believe that feather picking is a unique condition of captivity. Why? Well, as important as feathers are to a bird for flight and insulation, severe self-induced feather damage would not be compatible with life in the wild.

Some bird species are definitely more prone to feather pick than others. Any bird has the potential to feather pick, but the **African Grey Parrot**, members of the **Cockatoo** family, and members of the **Conure** family are most commonly affected. In the case of Grey's and Cockatoos, many authorities suspect that the high intelligence level of these birds contributes to the problem. Some authorities also suspect that feather picking may be more common in females than in males.

Causes of Feather Picking

There are many causes of feather picking but they can all be classified into one of two broad categories: **Medical** or **Psychological**.

Most experts believe that only about 5% of cases of feather picking are medical in origin. The vast majority (95%) are thought to be psychological in origin.

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Exactly what triggers psychological feather picking in companion birds is unknown. It probably varies from individual to individual.

Psychological feather picking has many similarities to the human syndrome called Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). OCD is a type of anxiety disorder affecting about 0.05% of the human population. Interestingly, the condition is more common in people of above average intelligence.

To simplify: humans affected with OCD display what are termed “stereotypic” behaviors. Stereotypic behaviors are repetitive and persistent and seem to serve no obvious purpose. Furthermore, they are often exaggerated grooming behaviors. Examples include constant nail biting, incessant fiddling with the hair, frequent hand washing, repetitive touching of light switches, etc. Apparently these stereotypic behaviors are a result of some powerful internally derived thought or urge.

Functionally, OCD may work something like this: A thought or urge continually resurfaces in the affected person’s mind (the obsession). The individual regards the thought or urge as "bad", seeks to suppress it, fails, and then becomes anxious or frustrated at his or her failure. In other words, anxiety develops in the individual’s mind because they want to do something, but they know they should not. This internal mental conflict is irresolvable and eats at the individual over time. Eventually he or she finds some relief by displacing his anxiety onto the physical world in the form of ritualized or repetitive behaviors (the compulsion).

Sigmund Freud captured the essence of this phenomenon very succinctly. He is credited as having said, “Patients with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder are impelled to perform actions which not only afford them no pleasure, but from which they are also powerless to desist.”

Similarly, in birds a large number of unusual behaviors are all thought to be stereotypic behaviors from which the affected birds are powerless to desist. Some examples of such behaviors include: feather picking, self mutilation, constant screaming, endless perch pacing, constant perch dancing, repetitive egg laying, and psychological water drinking. These activities serve no obvious purpose that we can discern. They certainly don't seem to afford the bird any pleasure. Perhaps these behaviors are external manifestation of an internal mental conflict that the affected bird can not resolve.

So what could be bothering a bird so much that it would chew at its own feathers? Nobody knows for sure. But here are some possibilities:

- **Bad Genes.** Just as there are self-destructive people in world, so too are there probably are some birds who will destroy themselves no matter what we do. These birds have some sort of organ deficiency or organic behavioral dysfunction. They would not have survived in the wild. Captivity, however, has allowed these harmful genes to be passed down through the generations. Thankfully, there are few birds in this category.
- **Adverse Life Experiences.** The majority of feather pickers probably fall into this category. Something about the life experience of these birds has led to the development of stereotypic behaviors. The triggering life experience may have been early life experience. For example, avian authorities say that it is very *uncommon* to see a wild-caught African Grey Parrot who is a feather picker. However, some experts claim that as many as one in five hand-reared African Grey’s will feather pick. The main difference between these two groups of birds is in their early life experiences. One group grows up in the wild with parents and siblings. The other group grows up in a box with no siblings and human hands instead of parents. The difference in socialization is

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apparently critical. Alternatively, the triggering life experience may occur in later life. For example, a bird might encounter something that is very frightening or something that is challenging to the perceived social order. Perhaps the bird finds itself in a situation that is confusing to its understanding of the current social hierarchy. Any of these situations could create an irresolvable mental conflict in the bird's mind, and it may react with displacement behaviors such as feather picking.

- **Chronic Motivational Conflicts.** The bird wants to do something -- say fly about the room, or open the latch and release itself from the cage-- but it knows that it should not. This again could create an irresolvable mental conflict in the bird's mind, and it may seek relief through displacement behaviors such as feather picking.
- **Chronic Physical Restraint/Confinement.** It is rare to see a feather picker who has spent his entire life living on a free standing perch. Nearly all feather pickers live in bird cages. The practice of keeping a pet parrot in a cage in the USA began in the early 1950's. Prior to that time, pet parrots lived on free standing perches, or they walked the house, or they lived in flight aviaries. Forcing an intelligent and active creature such as a parrot to live in a small metal box represents a forced lifestyle change that is very different from what the parrot has evolved for. These birds would normally spend hours each day flying and climbing and walking up and down trees. Is it a stretch to imagine that this might cause the bird some anxiety?
- **Unstable Social Order and Social Inconsistency.** It appears that about the time people started confining parrots to bird cages, they also stopped house training them and teaching them basic manners. This may have proved to be very damaging to the psychology of the parrot. Parrots are very intelligent and social. They are also flock creatures. They evolved to expect rigid social hierarchies and clear behavioral boundaries. Consequently, it is really no more difficult to house train a parrot than it is to house train a puppy. You just have to work at it! Remember too that it is the humans who provide the social framework for a companion bird, and it is the inconsistencies of the humans that under-mine that social framework. Why, a bird might ask, is it OK to scream and throw food during the 6-o'clock news, but not during Jeopardy? Or, why is it OK to chew up this wooden perch but not OK to chew up that wooden door jamb? They're both made of wood! What are they going to get onto me about next? What have I done now?
- **Conditioning.** A happy well-adjusted bird in a flock setting will grow up learning that unacceptable behaviors do not bring it the attention it needs and desires. In the home setting, however, humans may frequently accidentally condition or train their bird to feather pick. Here is how it might work: Imagine a lonely bird. It spends all day alone in its cage. Out of boredom, one day, it begins to pick at its feathers. Later, the bird observes that this causes some degree of excitement among the humans in the household. Birds delight in activity, attention, and excitement. The humans rush around excitedly and pick the bird up, handling it for the first time in weeks. They examine the bird, pet it, and talk among themselves in worried tones. The bird thinks that's just great! He or she is eating this stuff up! What do you suppose that bird will do the next time it is feeling lonely or bored?
- **Reproductive Stress.** "Sexual frustration" is commonly cited as a cause of feather picking, especially in the older companion bird literature. While this probably does occur to some extent, most avian medicine experts now seem to think that this factor may be a bit over blown. It is true that if a solitary feather picker is introduced to a new cage mate of the opposite sex, the original bird will often reduce or stop its feather picking. However, almost never do the two birds go to

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mate. They may eventually, but not initially. More likely, what is happening is that the new bird acts as a distraction for the original bird. The original bird's mind is now occupied with something other than its own internal mental conflict.

- **Medical Disease** - As mentioned, true organic disease causes about 5% of cases of feather picking. However, those are the very ones most likely to respond to treatment! Shame on us if we fail to look for an underlying medical problem.

Regardless of the underlying cause, feather picking may eventually become a habit. *So, even if the original cause is identified and corrected, the habit will often persist.*

Symptoms and Diagnosis of Feather Picking

Feather loss is usually easy to spot. However, feather loss is not the same thing as feather picking. *Feather loss or feather damage on the body and neck with preservation of feathers on the head is the hallmark of feather picking.*

Regional feather loss - for example, the tail only, or the breast only - may be simply normal molting. Feather loss or feather damage everywhere, including on the head, suggests feather picking caused by a cage companion or by a systemic disease like Beak and Feather Disease.

Self mutilation is feather picking with subsequent damage to skin and muscle. Self mutilators that work at it long enough can permanently disfigure themselves.

Proper diagnosis of feather picking is complex and time consuming. To be candid, it will not be inexpensive either. So why bother with diagnostic testing? Well, there are at least four good reasons:

1. In the veterinary literature, the majority of feather pickers that have reportedly achieved long term remission were the ones with some treatable medical disorder.
2. A few feather pickers will turn out to have an untreatable medical disorder such as Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease. It is important to know if such a fatal and contagious virus is present.
3. Psychological feather picking is a diagnosis of exclusion. That means that it is only through failure to identify a medical disorder that one is left with a diagnosis of physiological feather picking.
4. Psychological Feather Picking is one of the least desirable diagnosis because it carries such a poor prognosis. Treatment of feather picking is most likely to be successful only if a specific treatable medical cause can be identified.

At Chastain Veterinary Medical Group, we have evolved the following protocol to work up a feather picking bird:

- Observation, collection of a detailed history, physical examination.
- Laboratory testing: CBC, full biochemical panel, serum bile acid analysis, and DNA Probe tests for Beak and Feather Disease and Avian Polyomavirus.
- Parasite Checks: fecal parasites examinations for internal parasites, special tests for the parasite Giardia.
- X-rays.
- Examination of damaged feathers: examination for parasites, cytology and culture to determine the nature of any infection present.
- Examination, biopsy and culture of any skin wounds.

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At the end of all of this testing, we will have either identified a treatable medical disorder, or an untreatable medical disorder, or eliminated medical disorders as probable causes.

Treatment of Feather Picking

Proposed treatments for feather picking are many and varied. Some treatments, such as dissolving aspirin in the bird's drinking water are potentially dangerous. Others, such as scolding the bird or stuffing the bird's enclosure with lots of toys, are not dangerous per se, but they are unlikely to work because they do not address the real underlying problem. The following discussion outlines the approach to feather picking that we have evolved at Chastain Veterinary Medical Group.

1. **Temper expectations of a quick and easy cure.** Whatever is causing the feather picking probably did not develop overnight. Nor is it likely to resolve overnight. Therefore, simplistic techniques like spraying the bird with bitter apple or other foul tasting substances is not likely to work. Likewise, the real problem is seldom simple itchiness or mite infestation, so applications of aloe vera or insecticide sprays are unlikely to be helpful. Remember that once initiated, feather picking can become habitual and may *continue even after the original cause is gone. Furthermore, chronic feather picking can cause enough damage to the feather follicles that the feathers will never regrow, even after the original cause is removed.* Therefore, a successful therapeutic end point for psychological feather picking is a reduction of the destructive behavior. Total elimination of the behavior with restoration of the bird's original beauty is uncommon. A thorough diagnostic work up of a feather picking bird is essential. Again, treatment is most likely to be successful only if a specific medical cause is identified.
2. **Treat any systemic disease identified.** Treatment of feather picking is most likely to be successful if a specific and treatable medical cause can be identified.
3. **Treat for bacterial or fungal skin infection.** Regardless of original cause, secondary bacterial or fungal infections of the feather follicles are often present. Treating these will often make the bird feel much better. In a few rare cases, treatment of infected feather follicles has solved the problem.
4. **Consider treating feather picking Old World birds for tapeworms.** Part of the diagnostic work up of feather picking birds should include fecal parasite checks. Unfortunately, these are not 100 % accurate. Therefore, regardless of the test results, some authorities suggest a trial treatment for tapeworms.
5. **Consider treating for Giardia.** Giardia are microscopic protozoal parasites that can infest the digestive system of birds. As with tapeworms, part of the diagnostic work up of feather picking birds should include special tests for Giardia. However, the little devils can be very difficult to identify. Therefore, regardless of the test results, most authorities suggest a trial treatment for Giardia.
6. **Optimize the diet.** Even today, many pet birds are still being fed incorrectly. This is doubly harmful if the bird is also a feather picker. It is very likely that feather pickers have increased nutritional needs due to blood loss and increased replacement feather production. *The best diet for the majority of pet psittacines is thought to consist of about 80% formulated bird pellets and 20% fruits, vegetables, and table food. No Seeds Please!*
7. **Remove from exposure to any contact irritants.** Contact irritants include such things as second-hand cigarette smoke, nail polish fumes, hair spray, gasoline fumes, soot, etc. In recent years, several anecdotal reports have linked feather picking with exposure to second hand cigarette smoke. Some authorities feel that the tars and nicotine may coat the feathers and irritate the bird.
8. **Provide frequent exposure to fresh air and sunlight.** Many experts recommend that the owners of feather pickers invest in a large outdoor flight enclosure. This should be something big enough

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that the bird will perceive it as a large room rather than as a tiny cell. *Caution: Never take your bird outdoors unless it is in an enclosure of some sort.*

9. **Provide an 8 - 14 hour photoperiod that varies with the season.** This is easily accomplished by placing the bird's enclosure in a solarium or near a window. Even better yet is to take the bird to an outdoor flight enclosure during the day.
10. **Institute basic bird training.** Most avian experts agree that that the majority of feather picking birds have never really been socialized or formally trained. Simple basic training helps socialize the bird, as well as bond owner and bird. It also provides a basic frame-work for social interaction. The key is consistency. Again, much of the internal mental conflict in a feather picker may be due to unstable or inconsistent social order, or lack of basic behavioral rules. A bird growing up in an environment without rules will grow up like a weed. Eventually, it will become frustrated as it matures and runs into human imposed limitations. This may cause any number of objectionable behaviors (e.g., feather picking, screaming, pacing, etc.). Proper early training and adequate socialization can prevent feather picking. *Once picking is established, however, basic training will not completely solve the problem but it may decrease the severity of it.* In order to be good companions, birds should be trained to respond to a minimum of six or seven commands such as "come," "up," "stay," "wing," "foot," and "go potty".
11. **Get the bird a job.** The idea is to give the bird something to occupy it's mind during the day. A simple way to give the bird a job is to install perches and toys which the bird "must" destroy -- for example, pine cones, square pine perches made of pieces of un-treated non-toxic two-by-four lumber, etc. It is the rare parrot who can look down at a two-by- four pine perch and not feel compelled to chew the square corners off! Once the bird finishes with one side, simply flip the perch over and you have another week's worth of distraction. Changing the bird's daytime environment to an outdoor flight enclosure, as mentioned previously, might be an even more ideal way to give the bird a job. For example, every morning (weather permitting) the bird is taken to the outdoor flight enclosure and left out there to do its own thing during the day. When the owner returns home in the evening, the bird comes back indoors to interact with the family. It then spends its nights indoors on a free standing perch, not in a cage. Some experts recommend that bird owners completely abandon conventional bird cages and instead allow the bird to live all the time on a free standing perch while indoors.
12. **Some other things to try** in order to keep the bird's mind occupied might include: new toys, moving the enclosure to a different room, rearranging the furniture in the room with the bird enclosure, offering low energy density foods such as water melon, installing unstable, wobbly perches, offering time consuming foods, teaching the bird how to play with its toys, etc. Some birds that are feather picking due to sexual frustration will stop when placed in an aviary or breeding situation. Others will not.
13. **Radios & TV** - some birds that are feather picking due to separation anxiety will reduced or stop the behavior if a radio or TV is left on in the family's absence. Similarly, a tape recording of normal family activities may help. Sometimes these changes have no effect at all.
14. **Consider a video camera.** Setting up a hidden video camera to secretly record the bird's day may prove very informative. In this way it may be possible to identify the specific factors that trigger feather picking -- for example, a tormenting pet, harassment from an adjacent bird, or separation anxiety.
15. **Consider drug therapy.** If the above therapies are ineffective after a two month trial, then drug therapy may be attempted. The drug haliperidol has given the most consistent results in our hands. Other drugs that occasionally work include Prozac and Human Chorionic Gonadotropin.
16. **Elizabethan collars are controversial.** Collaring a bird only masks the symptoms of a deeper problem. Collaring the bird will indeed stop the feather picking, but it also removes the one displacement behavior that the bird has to relieve his internal anxieties. So, now the affected bird

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is likely to be really frustrated! Collaring is most appropriate in those cases progressing to, or already involving, self mutilation. Collaring for cosmetic reasons alone is not appropriate.

Prevention of Feather Picking

Unfortunately, there is no sure way to prevent the development of feather picking. Following these suggestions may help, however:

- Avoiding those species prone to the behavior. Cockatoos, African Greys and Conures are most notorious for feather picking.
- Institute proper training and socialization. Start them early! The birds themselves expect it.
- Feed your bird correctly. As discussed -- 80% formulated commercial bird pellets + 20% fruits, vegetables, people food.

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