Feather Picking in Birds

Background Information

Feather picking is the most common skin disorder seen in pet birds. Feather picking cases are typically complex, multi-factoral, and often difficult to treat. Medical causes of feather picking must be eliminated prior to psychological causes being considered.

- Medical Causes
  - Allergies
  - Parasites
  - Infectious diseases
    - PBFD (Old World birds with abnormal feather development), PDD, Aspergillosis
  - Endocrine/Reproductive diseases
  - Environmental problems
    - Toxin/Irritant Exposure
      - Tobacco smoke, aerosols
    - Too dry of an environment or inability to bathe
    - Low light intensity
    - Inadequate rest (<12 hours)
    - These can all lead to itching or poor quality feather growth resulting in brittle feathers, which break as the bird plucks them. Many Psittacine species are from rain forest areas and will benefit from daily water spraying and weekly bathing. A continually dry environment may lead to premature wear on the plumage resulting in tattered feathers prior to the subsequent moult. A parrot with poor or damaged (or poorly clipped) feathers will often attempt to remove them.
  - Metabolic/Systemic Disorders
    - Hypothyroidism
    - Liver disease
    - Chlamydophilosis (Psittacosis)
      - May cause a wide range of clinical signs including poor plumage, emaciation, lethargy, fluffed appearance, breathing problems, sinusitis, diarrhea, neurological signs, yellow to green droppings, sudden death, or no clinical signs at all. This is the most common cause of liver disease in birds. Effects on the skin include general itchiness and plucking of the abdomen. All plucking birds should therefore be tested for this disease.
    - Heavy metal exposure
Folliculitis
- Bacterial
- Fungal
- Viral
- Genetic

Primary skin infection
- Malnutrition / dietary deficiencies
- Neoplasia

Possible Behavioral causes
The typical pet parrot has the mental age of a four year old but never grows up. In considering the conditions listed below, doing so through the eyes of a four year old will enable greater understanding of the behavior. Much information can be gained by finding when the bird plucks, who is present or absent at the time, the time of day, season of year, and how it reacts when it is plucking.

- **Attention seeking**
  - Many pet birds are bored and feather plucking can be an excellent way of attracting the owner's attention. The owner often gives positive reinforcement for the bad behavior by scolding the bird to try to get it to stop. The more the owner scolds the bird, the more attention is receiving, then happier it will be, and the more it will pluck. Such birds often vocalize to attract the owner's attention prior to plucking. These birds should be ignored, or one can use a "time out" method of behavioral modification. If the bird plucks, you go to the cage, do not address the bird, but cover it up. Initially for a three-minute period, increasing to as much as 15 minutes if necessary. The bird must receive negative feedback for its bad behavior rather than the positive encouragement it has received up until now.

- **Boredom**
  - Boredom or lack of routine is a very common cause of feather picking. In comparison with the bird's natural life in the wild, life in a cage or a household, when owners are often absent for much of the day, may be similar to solitary confinement for a human. A normal bird in the wild spends 50% of the day flying to and from and searching for food. Thirty percent of the day is spent playing with the bird's flock mates, and 20% is spent preening. A captive bird does not have to hunt for food, often has no flock mates to play with, and hence will fill more of the day with the preening which may then become compulsive. This should be addressed with environmental enrichment. If the bird can be kept occupied and active, these problems are less likely to arise.

- **Separation anxiety**
  - Separation anxiety may be as important as boredom as a cause of feather picking. Although seen in cats and dogs, it is even more likely in parrots in view of their high intelligence. Keeping the bird busy will help; medication can be of value but is NOT a solution unless combined with behavioral modification training. The training should be geared to break
down the anxiety triggers and to increase the parrot's confidence so it can
cope with short periods alone. Separation anxiety birds exhibit plucking
as soon as they are left alone. Giving them something to do to occupy
them when they are first alone helps, although care must be taken that the
activity does not become a signal of impending separation. The birds
should not be able to predict when or whether you are going out, or even
whether you have gone out. Separation anxiety may be overcome but it
requires considerable understanding, patience, and time.

- Stressors
  - These may be many, varied, and different to what a human would expect
to be stressful. The avian response to fear or threat is to flee. If unable to
escape it may redirect its energy to a "fear response", which may include
plucking or self-mutilation. Causes of stress or fear should be identified
and eliminated. Increasing confidence, behavioral medication training,
and facilitating controlled flight is beneficial. Medication may be useful
in the initial stages of retraining.
    - Overcrowding
      - Overcrowding and social stress can lead to plucking.
      - Overcrowding can lead to disputes between birds over
        territory.

- A dominant bird in a cage will sometimes pluck a
  subordinate bird in order to enforce its dominance.

- Environmental change
  - Birds are accustomed to a variable life. If variety is
    provided, they will be stimulated and enjoy it. If the bird is
    scared of the cage moving to a new room, coming out of
    the cage, or new toys in the cage, this is a certain indication
    that the bird has become "institutionalized" (acclimated to
    solitary confinement) - together with all the abnormal
    behavior patterns that accompany it. Birds unaccustomed
to change are unable to tolerate change. Recent change or
    constant change in the household can lead to plucking.
    Additions or losses of any members of the household
    (including other pets) can trigger plucking.

- Excessive preening
  - This may start as normal preening (in particular at the start of a moult) and
    then become obsessive, particularly if there is insufficient environmental
    enrichment.

- Sexual aggression or frustration
  - Aggression is most common in cockatoos and lovebirds. In such cases the
    head and beak are frequently attacked, although wings, chest, and legs
    may also be bitten. This is commonly a cause for many of the behavioral
    problems seen in cockatoos and African Grays. Parent reared birds mature
at five to six years, but hand reared birds can become sexually active from the age of six months. Some birds will regurgitate to a family member, or present their cloacal region. These birds perceive they are human and on becoming sexually active they request sexual favors from their owners. Signals from these birds are misread and not reciprocated. These birds require a multifaceted approach. Injections can be given to "turn off" the messages that stimulate the gonads to increase sex hormone production. At the same time, the owner to whom the bird has been making advances must not interact with, handle, or go near the bird for a period of at least 6 weeks. Exposure to daylight is reduced to 6-8 hours to stimulate a winter season. Although these treatments will defuse the situation temporarily, a long-term solution is required. Behavioral modification training must be used to gain a "parent/child" or "leader/follower" relationship (rather than a partner/partner relationship) between the owner and the bird. This is achieved primarily by achieving a dominant relationship over the bird. This must comprise height advantage at all times, but also the bird must be prepared to obey commands without question at all times. If this is achieved, further sexual problems are unlikely. Having two birds in separate cages but within each other's view can also lead to sexual frustration and may trigger plucking.

- Obsessive compulsive disorders
  - If a bird suddenly stops in the middle of its favorite activity just to pluck, it is either very itchy or is suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder. Medical therapy is often required to break the disorder, while serious environmental enrichment also needs to be implemented. Other causes of severe itching must be eliminated before assuming this diagnosis.

- Feather clipping
  - A poorly or unevenly clipped wing can stimulate a bird to start plucking. If the cut ends of the primaries are left at 30-50% of their full length, when the wing is closed against the body, they may irritate the abdominal wall.

- Trauma
  - Any bird which has had any traumatic injury (recent or historical) or internal pain may pluck over the source of pain.

**ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN BY THE OWNER OF A FEATHER PICKING BIRD:**

- **FIRST:** HAVE A COMPLETE PHYSICAL EXAMINATION AND APPROPRIATE DIAGNOSTIC TESTING DONE ON YOUR BIRD TO RULE OUT ANY MEDICAL CAUSES
- Improve the bird's environment (no smoking in bird's environment, not too dry, etc.)
  - 1. Daily bathing (helps on many levels)
     - Removes bacteria, molds, and general allergens from the feathers
- Provides the bird with something to do during the critical first 30 minutes after the owner leaves the bird
  - Spray the bird lightly with warm water every day; preferably allow access to a bath.

- 2. Correct dietary deficiencies by improving the diet
- 3. Eliminate broad allergic irritants
  - Do not expose birds to perfumes, smoke, incense, cleaning product fumes, or aromatics or any sort. Wash your hands before handling your bird if you have had contact with any of the above.

- 4. Improve access to UVA and UVB light
  - This is important for uptake of calcium into the body and may be necessary for appropriate thyroid metabolism.
  - Bring birds outside in warm weather or provide a good UV light (Ott light) by the cage.

- 5. Do not give attention to the feather picking bird.
  - Admonishing a bird not to pick has never cured a single feather picking bird and can teach a bird to use feather picking as an attention getting device.

- 6. Keep daily records of events surrounding the feather picking
  - This allows us to get clues as to the cause of the problem. Recorded data such as the amount of feather picking, the time of day, activities surrounding the picking, and the food eaten that day.
  - This also will give us an indication of response to therapy. Frequently, helpful treatments are discarded because they do not totally stop the problem. Recording minimal improvements are very helpful in finding a cure for the problem.

- 7. Spent more time with the bird when it is NOT picking.

- 8. Provide more time outside of the cage.

- 9. Provide multiple (12) toys, but only put 4 in the cage at any one time, and rotate them weekly
  - Climbing toys
    - Plastic chains, ladders, ropes, swings, and the cage itself
  - Chewing toys
    - Wood branches (with the bark left on), pasta, rawhide, empty paper towel rolls, paper threaded through the cage bars; encourage the bird to be destructive!
  - Foot toys
    - Stimulate manual dexterity, and may include pine cones, pieces of corn on the cob, nuts left in whole shells to manipulate and break open, etc.
  - Puzzle toys
    - One of the most important groups. These may include parrot style music boxes and puzzle boxes that contain food, which they can access if they complete a task

- 10. Leave the TV or radio on during the day
• A bird's environment is not naturally quiet - lack of noise in a jungle situation usually is an indication of danger. Keep the radio or TV on if you are out. Let the bird out of the cage as much as possible, but beware of household dangers - in particular the risk of chewing electrical wires and the ingestion of heavy metals (lead or zinc).

➢ A feather plucking bird MAY have to have a collar placed temporarily to prevent it from plucking while wounds heal. A bird may have to be hospitalized initially while it becomes accustomed to the collar. Please note that collaring is only a temporary means to an end, and is NOT a solution for feather picking.

➢ Behavior Modification Training
  - Most young wild psittacines remain with their parents for a considerable period. During this time, most of the bad behavioral problems would arise and be dealt with by the parents (ie: phobias, excessive territoriality, biting, screaming, feather picking). Since parental guidance is usually lacking in captive-bred parrots, increased alternative training must be supplied.
  - It is important that the bird knows his position within the domestic flock. The owner should exert dominance, as in time should all members of the family. The bird must be maintained at or below adult chest height. Each day the bird should be taken into a room it is unaccustomed to, and trained using basic commands. Do basic "up", "down/off", "no", "ok" commands. Up and down/off refer from perch to arm and back, no is simple, ok denotes the owners decision to allow the bird to do something. Birds soon quiet down and become less erratic and irritable once training commences. Such training can often assist in reducing the daily stress of a plucking bird, as the bird feels secure being part of a "flock". Make sure all aspects of its life (food, exercise, entertainment, thinking, etc.) more exciting and varied.

(Compiled from information by:
  Neil Forbes, DVetMed, Dip ECAMS, CBiol, MIBiol, FRCVS
  Tammy Jenkins, DVM)