

# Feather Picking in Pet Parrots

Lynne M. Seibert, DVM, MS, PhD, Diplomate ACVB, Veterinary Specialty Center, Lynnwood, Washington



Pet psittacine patients are frequently presented with feather-picking problems. What is the best way to approach and treat this condition?

**F**eather-picking disorder is the most common behavior problem for which a parrot is presented to the veterinarian.<sup>1</sup> It is characterized by self-inflicted damage to feathers or soft tissue, or feather removal, with no adequate physical explanation. Feather loss or damage is limited to areas where the bird can reach. The consequences of feather picking may be strictly aesthetic to the bird's owner, or result in more serious sequelae, including loss of insulation, increased disease susceptibility, and blood loss. Finding effective therapies for feather-picking disorder has been limited by a lack of scientific information with respect to the behavioral characteristics of psittacine species and the patterns and causes of feather-picking disorder in pet birds.

## Normal Preening

Feather-picking disorder has been described as an exaggeration of normal preening behavior. Preening consists of the behaviors that care for the body surface, such as cleaning feathers, applying oil from the uropygial gland, and removing feather sheaths from new feathers.<sup>2</sup> In the course of normal preening, no damage to the feathers or skin should occur.

## Species Predispositions

Feather-picking disorder is diagnosed most often in African grey parrots, macaw species, cockatoo species, Eclectus parrots, and Quaker parrots. Although no epidemiologic studies have been done on which birds have feather-picking disorder, the literature is fairly consistent in citing these predisposed species. In contrast, the disorder is diagnosed less frequently in Amazon species, cockatiels, and budgerigars.<sup>2</sup>

## Medical Concerns

Feather-picking disorder is diagnosed when the clinician cannot identify a medical or nutritional cause for the problem. There is no standard medical evaluation for feather-picking birds. Diagnostic testing should be tailored to the individual patient. The following conditions should be considered, along with appropriate diagnostic testing<sup>3</sup>:

- Organopathies (hepatic/renal disease)
- Specific organ system abnormalities can present as self-trauma localized to that area (for example, damage to feathers of the ventral abdomen associated with reproductive problems)
- Viral diseases (psittacine beak and feather disease, polyomavirus)
- Systemic bacterial and mycotic infections
- Dermatologic infections
- Malnutrition
- Endoparasitism (giardiasis)
- Toxin exposure
- Environmental irritants
- Cutaneous trauma
- Neoplasia

Evaluation will include a physical examination, nutritional history, behavioral history, complete blood count, plasma chemistries, radiographs, fecal Gram's stain, and direct fecal examination. Additional diagnostics may include viral serologic testing, heavy metal assays, endoscopy, fluoroscopy, allergy testing, and biopsies of affected feathers and skin.<sup>4</sup> Allergy testing in psittacine patients is still controversial and undergoing further investigation.

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## Postulated Causes

The causes of feather-picking disorder have not been determined. According to some, lack of environmental stimulation is the most important cause. Free-ranging psittacine birds spend a large amount of time foraging for food, and ad libitum provision of food allows more time for behavioral problems to develop.<sup>5</sup> Other potential causes include environmental or physical stressors, overcrowding, separation anxiety, inappropriate housing conditions, and lack of a predictable routine, since flock membership involves very stable, structured activities.<sup>6</sup>

Reproductive causes may account for some cases of feather picking. Preparation of a brood patch involves removing feathers from the abdomen and legs, which improves warming of the eggs. Seasonal feather picking associated with breeding activity is usually temporary and does not typically require treatment unless it becomes persistent.

The onset of reproductive behavior in some psittacine species is affected by the length of the photoperiod.<sup>2</sup> Many pet birds are exposed to unnatural or excessive photoperiods, resulting in sleep deprivation and undesirable reproductive behaviors.

With chronic feather picking, the precipitating cause may no longer be a factor. There are many feather-picking birds that are fed proper diets, given stimulating toys and appropriate housing, and exposed to fresh air and sunlight and appear to have a good relationship with family members. Alternative mechanisms for the disorder may need to be explored.

## Compulsive Behaviors & Impulse-Control Disorders

Feather-picking disorder has been compared with compulsive and impulse-control disorders in humans. Obsessive-compulsive disorders are characterized by repetitive behaviors performed in an attempt to prevent or reduce anxiety. Trichotillomania, or hair pulling, is an impulse-control disorder of humans. It is characterized by removal of hair resulting in alopecia and may involve hair twirling, chewing the hair, and trichophagia. Similarities between feather-picking disorder in birds and trichotillomania in humans have been discussed.<sup>7</sup>



## Treatment

It is crucial to the behavioral health of psittacine birds to provide optimal housing conditions and an appropriate environment.<sup>8</sup> The enclosure should be composed of nontoxic materials and be large enough to allow a variety of movements. It should be located in an area that provides fresh air and sunlight but is free of drafts and risk for exposure to potentially toxic chemicals. Perches in a variety of sizes and shapes should be made from natural hardwood trees and replaced frequently. Without overcrowding, a variety of toys should be provided, including some that afford opportunities to chew. Toys can be rotated on a weekly basis to maintain the bird's interest. Environmental enrichment inter-

### WHAT TO DO

- Pursue a thorough physical and medical evaluation.
- Provide a balanced and nutritious diet, including a formulated parrot diet with supplemental fruits and vegetables.
- Provide a safe but stimulating environment.
- Provide opportunities for the bird to manipulate appropriate objects.
- Vary the environment to suit the individual bird.
- Use air purifiers to reduce exposure to airborne irritants.
- Increase bathing opportunities.
- Remove sources of stress.
- Provide a natural photoperiod, with an adequate quantity of uninterrupted sleep.

ventions often include opportunities for foraging.<sup>5</sup> Birds are social species, and opportunities for interaction are extremely important, including direct attention from the caregivers, learning tricks, and interactive play.

Physically preventing the bird from mutilating itself may be necessary, and restraint collars have been used. A sweater (left) is a less-restrictive option.<sup>9</sup>

## Medication Options

If feather-picking disorder is behaviorally analogous to compulsive disorders, then similar neurochemical mechanisms may exist that could result in similar responses to psychoactive agents. Serotonergic agents are the most commonly prescribed pharmacologic therapies<sup>10</sup>; however, there are few published studies on whether these agents reduce feather picking. Medications should be used with caution, since safety, efficacy, and side effect profiles have not been established for birds. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices.