



BEHAVIOR AND FEATHER PICKING

Clermont Animal Hospital Inc.

Environmental

Changes in weather (i.e., heat, cold, humidity, dryness and possible allergens) should be taken into consideration as possible factors. New members of the household (human or animal), changes in the home environment, or changes in any aspect of the life of the primary “flock” member, whether emotional, personal or work-related, can all contribute to the behavior. In extremely young birds, it can be a learned behavior if there is already a feather-picking bird in the environment. Extremely heavy activity or movement, a high level of noise, or large numbers of animals in the immediate environment can make the bird nervous. Birds can see colors and some have distinct preferences. Some colors can elicit strong behavioral reactions; red can be a color that elicits pleasure or fear, depending upon the bird. Often feather picking can be traced to changes in the owner’s life (i.e., absences, vacation, change in work schedule, family emergency). Do not underestimate the client’s emotional state as a possible contributing factor. Birds are flock creatures and may interpret any situation that does not feel “right” or safe within that “flock” as possibly life threatening.

Sexual

As with humans, shifts in hormone levels can make a bird nervous and irritable. Some aspects of hormone production in psittacines are contingent upon environmental factors. Situations that may stimulate hormone changes must be examined. These include exposure to long photoperiods, usually occurring in the summer when there are long daylight hours; other sexually mature or nesting birds in the environment, especially if there is direct interaction with the bird in question; and dark places or nest boxes that may stimulate nesting behavior. Certain toys, which the bird treats as “babies” or “eggs,” may stimulate nesting behavior and increase sexual feather picking. Prolonged periods of cuddling, with close body contact, or rubbing the tail area or the backs of females can also contribute to hormone shifts. Any of these situations can also promote excessive egg-laying in unmated birds.

Control or Attention

Birds may engage in feather picking to seek attention. If the bird is feather picking and the client proceeds to scold it, examine the areas in question, sweetly admonish the bird, or even just look at the bird, the behavior is reinforced and the bird will continue to pick.

Boredom

Most birds are flock creatures that are accustomed to vigorous activity in the wild. Chewing is a natural part of their behavior and, if toys and objects for chewing are not available, the bird may pick at its feathers out of boredom.

Species Predisposition

Some birds appear to be predisposed to feather picking and do so as a response to any environmental or physiological stress. In some species, such as cockatoos, there is liberal social preening. Individual birds of these species may be predisposed to feather picking when kept as single pets.

Clinical Signs

Signs vary widely, from ruffling areas on the wings tops, to complete denuding of the trunk, wings, and legs. Partial or complete feathers may be damaged or missing. In birds that engage in self-mutilation the effect may range from simple dermal laceration to severe soft tissue wounds, such as the chewing off of toes and tearing of breast muscle.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis can often be difficult; some people may misinterpret the bird's condition. Frequently, first time bird owners mistake normal preening and molting behavior for feather picking. In addition, birds who play roughly on cages that have extremely thin bars frequently damage or break their tail feathers; the feather barbs will be missing from that area, with just the central shaft evident. Young, playful birds often have poor feathering prior to their first molt.

Corrective Techniques

Correction takes some detective work and is directly contingent upon the etiology of the condition. Often, there is more than one cause, and each one must be examined and eradicated to achieve success. Mutilation of the flesh may result in neuropathy and is not easily cured with simple behavior modification. Medical intervention is advised in birds that engage in self-mutilation. Removing the bird from environmental sources that induce nervousness or fear is important. Often, owners must be aware of and control their own stress levels. Limiting activity that may stimulate the bird sexuality or increase hormone production is necessary, especially during the bird's normal breeding period. Owners must take care not to inadvertently reinforce the feather-picking behavior by giving the bird inappropriate attention.

In acute or chronic cases, a collar can be used to temporarily restrain the bird. Collaring in behavioral feather picking will work only if it is used in conjunction with a customized behavior modification program. If the bird is not retrained during the period when it is wearing a collar, the behavior will return after it is removed.

Birds use their feet to grip, climb and eat; therefore, most birds adapt better to a tube-type collar than a wide collar. This allows them to see their feet and to use them for limited normal functions. However, with a tube collar, most birds can still reach their wings and legs to feather pick. Tube collars work best in birds that pick only the chest area.

Owners should offer toys that duplicate the sensation of feather picking and reinforce the behavior when the bird chooses to play with them. Wooden ice cream sticks, plastic or paper towel and toilet paper rolls (un-scented), wooden scrub brushes with natural fiber bristles, whisk broom, and toothbrushes all duplicate the sensation of feather picking.

Prevention

Some species of birds, including cockatoos, African grey parrots, and eclectics parrots, are predisposed to feather picking. Regardless of the species, most negative behaviors can be greatly reduced or eliminated by teaching the bird to play by itself, with or without toys. “Cling” birds need to be taught to be independent, yet interactive. Avoid any of the situations that may increase hormone production and exacerbate subsequent behaviors. Reward the bird for chewing on toys instead of its feathers. There is no prescription for behavior modification. For success, each situation must be assessed according to its unique components, and a program devised in which all deviant behaviors are corrected.

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