



Feather *picking*

Are you brokenhearted because your bird's once-beautiful plumage is carpeting her cage floor? Chances are she's not too happy either—something is bothering her enough to make her pull out those colorful feathers.

Feather picking is a common and frustrating problem in birds. Some pets nibble the ends off their breast feathers, while others tear their skin, creating large open sores. Any bird can feather pick, but psittacines, such as parrots and parakeets, are the most common offenders.

CAUSES

Feather picking may start because of irritation from a medical condition and progress to obsessive-compulsive behavior. Or several problems may coalesce to finally push an anxious bird over the edge. Common causes include:

Infection

Bacteria can attack skin and feather follicles, creating an itchy painful problem your bird chews at to relieve. And pets with vitamin deficiencies from incomplete diets are at increased risk of infection. Some viral infections, such as psittacine beak and feather disease and Polyomavirus infection, cause inflammation or abnormal feather eruption that irritates your bird's skin and triggers picking. And such parasites as mites and lice can cause a fierce itch when they burrow through your pet's skin and feathers. The good news: These parasite infestations are rare in hand-raised birds.

Allergies

Just as in people, pollen, mold, and certain foods occasionally trigger itchy allergies in birds. Your pet may resort to feather picking for relief. An allergic reaction to *Giardia* infections can cause skin irritation in cockatiels.

Environmental factors

Excessive heat or low humidity can cause itchy flaky skin. And stressful change, such as a new family member or pet, moving to a new house, or moving the cage to a different room, may cause your bird to pick her plumage.

Anxiety

Birds normally live in a flock, where they enjoy the sights and sounds of other birds. When you keep a solitary bird, you assume the role of the flock. So if you're nervous, upset, or absent, your bird may feel anxious and respond by picking her feathers.

Attention seeking

Many birds (like some children!) crave any attention they can get. If they discover that picking at their feathers brings you running or even just causes you to scold, they'll repeat the behavior to get your attention.

Boredom

Some pet birds are just plain bored. Evolution has trained them to poke, prod, and chew at everything in their environment as they forage for meals. It's perfectly natural for them to chew all day long. In the absence of a proper outlet, such as a chew toy, many turn to themselves.

Sexual frustration

Elevated hormone levels in sexually mature birds can make them irritable and anxious, especially during breeding season. So avoid environmental factors that stimulate breeding instincts—long periods of light exposure, nest boxes, or such toys as wooden spools or plastic balls that your female may treat as eggs.

Species predisposition

Social birds, such as cockatoos, African grey parrots, and eclectus parrots, groom each other in the wild, so solitary life may confuse and stress them. They may feel the urge to preen constantly and pick at their own feathers.

Hypothyroidism

Low thyroid-hormone levels may cause poor feathering or feather loss, which resemble feather picking. Watch your bird carefully to see if she's pulling her feathers or if they're falling out on their own.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AT HOME

First, visit your avian veterinarian to make sure a medical problem isn't the root of the picking. If your bird is physically healthy, there are many treatment options. But keep in mind that treating obsessive feather picking can be frustrating for the owner, veterinarian, and patient alike. Work with your veterinarian to determine realistic expectations.

Learn about your bird's normal preening and molting behavior so you can recognize abnormal feather loss. Birds who pluck their feathers usually give themselves away. If your pet sports feathers only on hard-to-reach places, such as her head and neck, she's likely the culprit!

A plastic cone-shaped collar can help in the short term, but without corrective training, your bird will start picking as soon as you remove the collar. Remember, don't give your bird attention while she's picking her feathers. Shower her with attention as often as possible, but never for inappropriate behavior.

Remove such sources of stress and fear as loud stereos, the family dog, or bright lights at all hours of the day. Birds with separation anxiety may benefit from a softly playing radio or television for company while you're away.



Offer imaginative ways for your bird to forage by hiding food in hollow toys and cardboard tubes or attaching food to ropes or chains. Let her satisfy the urge to preen excessively by providing items she can destroy—whisk brooms, empty paper towel tubes, wooden sticks, or rolled-up papers. There's a limitless supply of interactive toys to occupy your pet's time—just alternate them to prevent boredom. You may need to use these measures for the rest of your bird's life to keep her from a path of self-destruction.

WHAT YOUR VETERINARIAN WILL DO

To rule out disease, the doctor may perform blood tests, radiographs X-rays, and skin and feather cultures and biopsies. Information about your bird's environment, personality traits, and where you purchased her may help unravel the cause behind her compulsive behavior.

Some veterinarians may prescribe Prozac and other fluoxetine, an antianxiety and/or tranquilizer medications to calm your pet while you correct the picking behavior. Many are human drugs, so Your veterinarian can't predict your pet's reaction when beginning and adjusting these medications and it may take trial and error to determine the correct dosage.

PROGNOSIS

Entertaining these highly intelligent pets is a daunting task, and some will continue their feather picking despite your best efforts. Patience and perseverance are your best weapons against your precious pet's disagreeable habit.