

A Feather Plucking Bird

There is nothing birdkeepers despair of more than the bird that feather plucks. For years bird owners have cringed in embarrassment whenever anyone saw they had a chronic feather plucking bird. Every remedy was tried, very few were successful.

To help these birds we must be a little logical and a lot patient. The first step in helping the feather plucker is to decide if it is a feather plucker. Not all birds with scraggy feathers are pluckers - many birds suffer diseases which will cause their feathers to fall out or look ragged. Viral diseases, such as PBFD (Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease) and Polyoma virus, bacterial skin diseases, chlamydiosis and a host of internal diseases can cause feather problems. External factors such as mites and lice, cockroaches and cage design also cause feathering disruptions.

When deciding if the bird is a true feather plucker look closely at the bird - ask yourself:

- What species is affected?
- What is the pattern of feather loss?
- Are there feather shafts still in the skin?
- How long are feathers that are damaged?
- Are other birds affected if so how?
- What is the diet of the bird, how long has it been on this diet?
- Is the bird well in other aspects - eating, activity, behaviour, droppings etc?
- Is the skin affected or just the feathers?

Careful observation is necessary to be accurate - often a good close look will give you the answer.

Some bird species are much more prone to true feather plucking than others - the Gang Gang is an example. These birds are notorious pluckers, careful examination will show they destroy feathers about 1 to 2 cm from the skin. Their pattern of plucking is usually - flight - tail - chest, so they end up as a flightless, downy bird with no resemblance to the most charming of the cockatoos.

Feather loss over the head indicates an outside factor, usually the mate, is involved. Young bird in the nest with feathers missing from their backs and head are being plucked by their mother - generally she wants them to leave the nest so she can lay again.

Careful examination of feathers and skin will show lice or mite if they are present. Holding a feather up to the light will show feather lice very clearly - there can be massive numbers present in some birds. Budgies can have large numbers at the base of the tail feathers, so many that they look like mud stuck to the feathers. Treatment for all mite, lice and insects in the birds environment and on the bird is the new all purpose insecticide from Vetafarm - Avian Insect Liquidator (A.I.L.).

A.I.L. contains a water based insecticide that is harmless to birds but deadly to insects. The long activity time of A.I.L. means that adult insects, nymphs and eggs are all killed. The residual activity of this new insecticide will leave your birds insect free for many weeks. A.I.L.'s safety allows you to spray the birds themselves, cages, perches and anything else in their environment in the one operation. Being water based, AIL will not sting the birds eyes allowing birds to be sprayed all over whilst in their cage.

Once you are happy that the bird is insect free, the next step in sorting out a plucker is to look at the diet. Lack of Vitamin A is a common cause of feather plucking, especially in Eclectus. These birds have a high Vitamin A requirement which is often not met by birdkeepers. The use of regular injections of Vetafarm ADEC (a safe injectable form of vitamins A, D, E and C) is the only way to control the problem. Other species of bird may suffer the same problem, especially those that evolved in forest regions, so the use of ADEC is recommended in most cases of feather plucking. One clue to the status of the birds Vitamin A level is to look at the soles of the feet - birds with smooth, shiny, pink looking feet are often Vitamin A deficient. Ensure that the diet being fed is adequate (most are not!). The addition to seed diets of SOLUVET, a water soluble, high potency vitamin supplement and PLUME PLUS or MOULTING AID used daily in the water when there is any feather loss will help balance the diet against a lack of essential vitamins by providing the recommended daily dose. However some birds will still require additional Vitamin A - this is when ADEC is invaluable.

The most difficult area to sort out are those birds who are Psychologic Feather Pickers. Once we are happy that insects, diet, outside factors and disease are not involved we arrive at the diagnosis of a wacky bird! The classic case here are the young galahs that have been hand reared. These birds miss out on the normal socialisation that occurs in the creches (the groupings of young Galahs in trees after they have left the nest). Some of these birds become disturbed at 9 - 12 months of age. They go from loving docile pets to this feather plucking, screaming, neurologic mess. Their temperament changes dramatically along with their appearance - these birds need to see an avian veterinarian who may decide to prescribe tranquillisers to stop the bird self mutilating.

It is primarily the hand reared birds and the cockatoos which are prone to Psychologic Feather Picking. Birds in the aviary, if they have tatty feathers, usually have a more physical problem. We see feathering problems related to disease - some diseases cause chemicals to be deposited in the skin that make the skin itchy. These birds will then begin to pluck or chew at their feathers until they cause major feather damage. Diseases such as Chlamydiosis (Psittacosis) and lung infections are known to show as skin/feather problems. For Chlamydiosis, the treatment of choice is Psittavet (pronounced "sit-a-vet") from Vetafarm. Available as a powder for in water flock treatments or as an injection, this drug offers the best, most effective way of treating Chlamydiosis. Most Australian birds are thought to have some degree of Chlamydiosis so regular treatments of the aviary are a way of preventing future disease. For more details on the problems associated with Chlamydiosis and the best ways to treat the disease contact your avian veterinarian or Vetafarm.

Should your bird become a ragged, scruffy looking individual, don't despair, start looking carefully at what he is eating and what he is doing but seek expert help if the simple treatments don't solve the dilemma.

by Dr. Tony Gestier BVSc. (Hons.), MACVSc.



Psittacosis

Psittacosis (also known as “parrot fever”, ornithosis, or chlamydiosis) is a widespread disease caused by an organism called *Chlamydia psittaci*. The pet bird owner may be increasingly aware of the prevalence of psittacosis, but that is believed due to improved diagnostic methods rather than actual disease incidence.

Psittacosis in Pet Birds

The chlamydial organism commonly occurs in wild populations of numerous bird species, however, the clinical disease is precipitated by man-made stresses such as transport, changes in feed or environment and intensive breeding practices.

Transmission of psittacosis is primarily by inhalation of infected dust from droppings or feathers, and is enhanced by close contact with sick birds that are shedding the organism. For this reason, the disease is most often seen in birds that have been recently transported, housed in pet shops or boarded with other birds

Treatment

If psittacosis has been diagnosed in one of your birds, your veterinarian may recommend treatment of all exposed and potentially infected birds. To reduce the spread of the disease it is imperative that the patient be isolated from other birds on the premises.

Although PSITTAVET is generally believed to be efficacious in treating chlamydiosis, the success of the treatment depends upon the species, age, presence of concurrent infections and immune status of the patient. Medication can be given by direct oral administration, by injection, as medicated pellets or mixed in soft foods. The specific medication and route of administration are left to the discretion of the veterinarian. Unless the birds are already accustomed to a pelleted diet, the use of medicated pellets is not appropriate as the stress involved in converting to a new diet may exacerbate the disease. The treatment period will last a minimum of 45 days. Depending on the condition of the patient, other forms of supportive therapy may be necessary. There is no immunity to the disease, and birds are susceptible to reinfection even after full recovery or previous treatment. During treatment, the owner is advised to:

- Exercise caution in the handling of bird droppings
- Keep circulation of feathers and dust to a minimum
- Separate and isolate any other birds that may show beginning signs of the disease
- Avoid contact with birds by elderly, pregnant, sick or very young persons, especially in the early stages of the treatment
- Reduce stresses in the birds environment.

Clinical Signs

There are no specific signs that are characteristic of psittacosis. Some birds may show general “sick” symptoms - lack of appetite, weight loss, depression and listlessness, watery green droppings, discharge from eyes or nares or even sudden death. Of course, these signs may be related to diseases other than psittacosis. Many birds carry the chlamydial organism but do not show any signs of the disease under stable conditions. These birds may become sick after some stressful occurrence, or breeding birds may pass the organism

to their offspring who may die in the nest or at weaning. Young birds are more susceptible to a debilitating infection than are adult birds. Birds do not have to show symptoms of disease in order to transmit chlamydia

Dagnosis

Positive diagnosis of chlamydiosis in the live bird is sometimes very difficult, depending on the species, length of time since exposure and general condition of the bird. In addition to having the capability of producing disease on its own, chlamydia undermines the immune system and opens the body to a host of other pathogens; thus, bacterial or viral disorders may be occurring at the same time. Because it is far easier to diagnose a bacterial problem, the chlamydiosis may be missed. A chlamydiosis screening test is available (CLEARVIEW TEST)- this can be performed by an avian veterinarian. Your avian veterinarian may be able to make a presumptive diagnosis of psittacosis based on history, clinical signs, X-rays, blood work or other diagnostic methods. If psittacosis is suspected, treatment should begin at once, even as confirmatory tests are being run. Psittacosis Further testing of affected birds is advised following therapy, as the treatment may not be fully effective, even though clinical signs abate. In extreme cases, especially those involving aviaries with significant losses, euthanasia may be necessary for individual birds if multiple tests indicate a persistent infection after repeated treatment attempts.

Preventative Measures

The following recommendations help prevent psittacosis in flocks or household pets:

1. Take all new birds to a qualified avian veterinarian immediately after purchase for chlamydiosis screening tests.
2. Buy birds from reputable suppliers who screen for the presence of chlamydia. An avian veterinarian in your area may be able to recommend a quality source.
3. Isolate all newly acquired birds for a period of at least 6 weeks.
4. Periodically monitor breeding flocks for chlamydiosis.

Psittacosis in Humans

The chlamydial organism is capable of being transmitted from birds to humans, but this rarely occurs despite the relatively high incidence of infection in birds. Although psittacosis infection in humans is normally mild, it is potentially dangerous for persons who are sick, elderly or immunosuppressed (e.g. AIDS patients). Persistent “flu-like” symptoms such as fever, chills, headache, weakness, fatigue and respiratory signs may be experienced. Anyone who is exposed to pet birds and who develops a prolonged case of the flu should seek the advice of a physician because the condition in humans may be misdiagnosed.

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Further information on diet, hygiene, worming, vitamins, bird stress, licensing, Avian Vets and much more is available from the team at Kellyville Pets.