

Behavioral Modification Techniques in the Companion Parrot

There are a number of medical reasons for feather picking and a complete diagnostic evaluation of your bird's health status is always recommended. The following techniques may be helpful, however, whether the underlying cause of the feather picking is behavioral or medical.

(1) **Make efforts to lower any physical or emotional stress your pet bird may be experiencing.**

- Offer your bird a nutritious, balanced diet consisting of vegetables, nutrient-dense fruit, grains, and pellets with only limited amounts of seed.
- Increase your bird's exercise level. Does he have climbing and swinging toys?
- Bathing and proper humidity are essential for healthy skin and feathers. Bathe or mist your bird daily (or at least 3 to 4 times weekly). A cool-mist humidifier can also be a valuable addition to your bird's environment.
- Ensure that your bird is getting at least 8 to 10 hours of uninterrupted sleep.
- Provide frequent exposure to fresh air and sunshine, and prevent exposure to potential irritants such as cigarette smoke or incense. Smokers should wash their hands before handling birds.
- It has been theorized that the silence of an empty home when owners are away is unnatural for birds. Certainly for a free-ranging bird, silence means that danger, such as a predator, is near. Pet birds "home alone" may experience a constant low level of stress caused by this strong instinct. Leaving the radio or television on during the day may help to alleviate this problem. Children's programming, because of its bright colors and music, seems to be especially popular with the "feathered crowd".

(2) **"Occupational Therapy"**

In the wild, birds spend more than 90% of their day foraging for food. Therefore a pet bird that is not sufficiently stimulated, may turn to one of two behaviors—screaming or excessive preening. Excessive preening may eventually lead to feather chewing or picking.

- Increase the time your pet spends feeding by offering whole food items that he must work to consume.
- Place small amounts of food at multiple sites.
- Weaving greens through cage bars or creating shish kabobs may also prove entertaining.
- Avoid whole pitted fruits such as cherries and peaches since the pits are toxic if ingested. Avocado is also toxic to birds.

- Feeder puzzles can provide an excellent diversion. Some feeder puzzles are commercially sold, however homemade toys are fine as long as safety is considered. For instance, an unscented cardboard toilet paper roll with food hidden inside can be very entertaining for your pet.
- Teach your bird basic commands such as “up” and “down”. This will not only provide your pet with attention, but also the security of a routine. Basic training skills will also make a visit to the veterinarian or groomer much less stressful for your pet. Only one person should be the “trainer” for the first 3 to 4 weeks. Training sessions should occur at least 4 times weekly, and last approximately 15 minutes. Pick one spot for these sessions, and be sure to prevent interruptions. Additional reading is strongly recommended!!
- Whether you decide to train your bird or not, we strongly recommend that a book on parrot behavior be read before you begin any behavioral modification. Excellent sources include, but are not limited to: Sally Blanchard’s Companion Parrot Handbook, Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot by Mattie Sue Athan, My Parrot, My Friend by Bonnie Munro Doane and Thomas Qualkinbush, and Birds for Dummies by Gina Spadafori and Dr. Brian Speer.

(3) Chew Toys

Chewing or shredding is an important behavior all parrots must indulge. Unfortunately, some pet birds begin to chew on their feathers. Redirect this normal/abnormal behavior by providing plenty of chew toys.

- Clean wood scraps (NOT pressure treated) of medium hardness and scraps of non-tanned leather work well.
- Hard nuts such as walnuts or Brazil nuts, or even coconuts may also be enjoyed.
- Untreated, natural wood branches from fruit trees, willow bark, and dogwood may serve a dual role as perch and toy.

Realize that your bird will destroy these toys, and these items will need to be replaced periodically.

(3) Change is Hard

Realize that for some birds (and people) ANY change, good or bad, can cause stress. Take your pet’s personality into account and don’t get carried away when making changes or he may pick or scream more than ever. Even a new toy can be stressful for some birds.

(4) Positive and negative reinforcement

Take care not to reinforce feather picking or screaming by giving your bird attention for inappropriate behavior (i.e. making a fuss over him if you should see him pluck or spraying the bird with a water bottle).

- Try to ignore your bird or even leave the room if undesirable behavior is observed. Also, be very careful of your facial expression. As flock creatures, parrots seem to pick up on the strong feelings of owners.

- Positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior such as not picking or playing with toys is just as important.

(5) **Sexual frustration**

Sexual frustration is often touted as a possible cause of feather picking. Therefore, one solution suggested for the feather picking bird is to bring a second bird into the household to serve as a potential mate. We do not recommend this practice since more often than not; the new bird may learn to feather pick as well.

- Avoid petting or scratching below your bird's neck. In the bird world, only mated pairs preen each other underneath the wings and over the back. Your pet bird may take this type of attention the "wrong way" if he or she is past the age of puberty.
- Your veterinarian may also recommend medication and manipulation of day length if sexual frustration appears to play a role in your pet's feather picking.

(6) **Persevere!**

We hope these suggestions prove helpful. Choose the behavioral modification techniques that you believe will work best for you and your bird, and then stick with them for a minimum of 6 to 8 weeks. Realize that if your bird has been a chronic feather picker, the behavior is unlikely to stop completely. Instead, our goal will be to decrease the frequency of the picking and to improve your pet's quality of life.

Please contact your avian veterinarian with any additional questions or concerns.

References

Blanchard S. *Sally Blanchard's Companion Parrot Handbook*. Abbey Press; Oakland, California, 1999.

Lightfoot T, Nacewicz CL. Psittacine behavior. *In*: Bays TB, Lightfoot T, Mayer J. *Exotic Pet Behavior*. Saunders; St. Louis, Missouri, 2006. Pp. 51-101.

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