



Medical Center For Birds

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Feather Damaging Behavior

Feather damaging behavior is...behavior. Although there can be some physical health aspects to the problem that may require investigation and treatment, there ALWAYS is a need for a tailored behavior change plan. Once it has been determined that there is not a significant physical health problem requiring address, the REAL job of behavioral modification and enhancement begins. The parrot that has been pulling its feathers for ten years is not a good candidate, prognostically, to return to normal plumage. The real focus, despite the apparent and heartbreaking feather damage, needs to be on the behavior and the mind of the bird, NOT the plumage.

- Take the time to assure that perceived stability and security are present in this bird's lifestyle at home. There can be many reasons leading to feather damaging behavior, including fear (fear of interacting with people), chronic falling due to inadequate perching/caging, or an inappropriate wing trim, remember that every bird and situation is different. Seek to rule out and/or eliminate these types of factors should they be present.
- Sometimes, there may be an antecedent, or event that occurs directly before your bird chews on their feathers. For example, when the baby cries your bird starts barbering feathers. Or when you leave the room, your bird might start pulling feathers. Depending on your individual bird and your veterinarian's recommendations, teaching your bird an alternative behavior may be helpful. One of the most difficult things about unwanted behaviors is that these behaviors still serve a purpose to our birds (although they are not convenient/desired from us). By teaching an alternative behavior, like chewing on a shredding toy, your bird still has a behavior to meet its needs however the behavior is more suitable for us. For example, you leave the room, and your bird starts chewing on his shredder toy. This takes time to first teach an alternative behavior and second make the alternative behavior reinforcing enough that it will be an easy choice for your bird. Your bird is always making choices. In this example: Is it more reinforcing for your bird to chew on their feathers or to chew on a shredder toy? By offering reinforcement when your bird chews on shredder toys, wicker, balsa, or other shredding toys, you build up a strong reinforcement history over time.

- Encourage “normal” feather care through gentle misting, if this is an acceptable method of bathing for your bird. If your bird prefers showers or bathing in a dish these are also great ways to encourage bathing and normal feather care.
- Enrich and enhance social interaction. Social interaction that is engaging, stimulating, and provides periodic change in the environment is essential for mental health and well-being. You can find more information in the Foundation Behavior handout.
- Teach your bird new foraging skills and encourage shredding as an alternative behavior to pulling or barbering feathers. Teaching new foraging tasks can take time and requires coaching from you. Your bird will enjoy foraging and learning new foraging games with you!
- If there is a reproductively-pair bonded interaction present between one person and the bird, work to alter this towards a more “normal” flock and social interaction (non-reproductive linked behaviors). For every pair bond enrichment behavior, you are working to decrease, offer an alternative activity to do with your bird.
- Try to keep your focus on the activities and lifestyle of your bird – not the feathers. A changing, expanding and improving lifestyle, augmented behavioral interactions with and without you present, is the goal. A reduction in feather damaging behavior hopefully the result but the real goal is to improve welfare and happiness with or without feathers. Check out our handout on Foraging and Enrichment!
- Follow up is crucial! Regular communication and follow-up evaluations are essential to address any questions you have and to ensure you and your bird are progressing. Follow ups can be in person, over the phone, by email, or video chat. Let us be your cheerleader!