Feather Picking and Self-Mutilation
by Kim Danoff, DVM

Feather picking and self-mutilation is an all too common condition in captive Psittacine birds. Unfortunately, the underlying cause can be difficult to determine, and treatment generally requires a great deal of time and dedication on behalf of the avian guardian.

Feather picking and self-mutilation can be due to one particular problem or cause, or can be due to a combination of things, that together, result in self-trauma. Different species deal with stress in different ways. Some birds, especially cockatoos, are very sensitive animals, and instead of outwardly showing their stress and unhappiness like an Amazon would, they internalize it and mutilate as a result. However, many Amazons self-mutilate as well.

When treating a bird that plucks or mutilates, it is important to understand that we need to address the whole animal and heal this bird from the inside out. Trying to treat just the symptoms does not get to the root of the problem. And we must treat the bird’s soul. These are sentient animals, with the intelligence of a 5 year old child. Many of these birds have been taken out of the wild, been neglected, abused or simply placed into a captive situation which may not be where they feel they belong. If we try to understand the nature of the beast, and treat them as wild animals, since many are only a few generations away from their wild ancestors, we will then be better able to address their needs.

Underlying Causes Include:

- Psittacine Beak & Feather Disease (PBFD)
- Lack of UV Light (especially UVB)
- Stress of Captivity
  - Lack of companionship
  - Lack of exercise
  - Housed in cages
- Food Allergies
- Environmental Allergies
- Zinc Toxicity
- Hormone Imbalance
- Giardia Infection
- Liver Disease

The Initial Steps Needed to Rule Out Potential Underlying Medical Conditions:

- Physical Exam
- Husbandry Evaluation (diet, bedding, housing, toys, etc.)
- Bloodwork (CBC, Chemistry Profile)
- +/- DNA sexing
- Tests for Infectious Diseases (PBFD, Chlamydia/Psittacosis)
- Fecal Gram Stain: to assess overall health
- Fecal Giardia Antigen Test
- Heavy Metal Testing (Zinc)
Environmental Assessment: exposure to potential allergens (cigarette smoke, dust, toxic chemicals/cleaning agents, etc.)

 +/- Allergy Testing

If the physical exam and diagnostic tests do not reveal an underlying disease process, then stress and allergies should be further evaluated.

Treatment:

- **High Quality Organic Diet:** Harrison’s Bird Diets - Either the High Potency (has corn & sunflower seeds) or Adult Lifetime Mash (an avoidance diet which is free of corn & sunflower seeds which can be beneficial in birds sensitive to these foods) can be mixed with fruit juice, soaked, and made into balls during the transition period on to a pelleted diet. Harrison’s Birdie Bread is a great way to help get your bird transitioned on to pellets. They typically love it and it comes in various flavors (original, flax, and pepper).

Small amounts of fresh or frozen fruits and veggies are ok to offer. Offer fruits that are high in antioxidants like blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, etc. Greens... they may resist them, but they are superb for their health (kale, romaine, dandelion, parsley, etc); beets are great to support their “blood” in Chinese Medicine and colorful veggies like pumpkin, squashes, and red cabbage are good for their Chi (Qi). Try raw and cooked. Raw is better, but not all birds like raw veggies. Avoid foods with added salt or with naturally occurring salt, as salt allergies have been reported in birds. Grapes and raisins should be eliminated as well.

- **Eliminate Potential Environmental Allergens:** cigarette smoke, potpourri, perfumes, paints, dust, traditional cleaning chemicals, pesticides, toxic paints, Scotch Guard, etc. Switch to cleaning products that are non-toxic to both humans and animals and are safe for the environment. Examples of non-toxic cleaning supplies include Ecover, Seventh Generation, and Seaside Naturals.

- **UV light:** UV light from the sun (especially UVB) is essential for Vitamin D synthesis. Vitamin D is required by the body to absorb calcium from the diets. Without Vitamin D, birds may become calcium deficient that can result in weak muscles and weak or soft bones (like osteoporosis in menopausal women) which can lead to bone fractures. In addition, birds that lay eggs are more likely to become egg bound if they have low calcium, and this is a life threatening emergency. Vitamin D is crucial for the health of birds. Vitamin D is required for proper immune system function; it is antibacterial, and helps with joint pain and autoimmune diseases. It is essential for a bird to thrive and for long term health and survival.

It is not easy providing a bird with their necessary Vitamin D requirements in a captive situation. It is important to provide access to UVB light daily or at a minimum of several times per week: via direct natural light (keep in mind, UV light does not penetrate glass or plastic) or via UVB light bulbs (fluorescent or incandescent). If using bulbs, they should be replaced every 3 months, and should be approximately 8-12 inches above the bird where he/she will bask. The bird must always have access to a shaded area when lights are in use if they are heat producing bulbs. Many of the UVB bulbs do not produce heat though. We recommend keeping them on a timer and keeping them on during daylight hours and modifying them during daylight savings time. For example 9/10am to 5/6pm. Go to Home Depot and purchase a
large clamp lamp with a ceramic base. Ensure that all cords are out of reach and protected to ensure your bird cannot bite the cord, as this can result in death. You can also cover your cord with cord protectors that can also be found at Home Depot. It is just another protective measure to prevent cord biting, and it would allow you to see bite marks before the bird might gain access to the cord itself. This can also be wrapped in electrical tape as an additional protector. Dr. Danoff typically places the clamp lamp on top of her enclosures; then uses the wall mount cord protectors, places the cord inside the protector, sticks it on the wall near the cage or on the back of the cage if a flat backed cage; there will be some cord that sticks out the top between the clamp lamp and the cord protector, and this should be covered with the black snake-like cord organizers and covered in electrical tape for additional protection. You will likely find that your birds sit underneath the lamps most of the day. It is almost like they know their bodies need the UV light.

- **Bedding:** Carefresh or newspaper. Avoid pine and cedar shavings/chips and corn cobb. The latter can result in skin and respiratory irritation and an allergic reaction.

- **Reduce Stress:**

  **Flight:** Provide a safe and controlled environment that will allow for exercise and flight, as flight is essential for a bird’s psychological and physical well-being. The benefits of exercise and flight include: weight loss and/or maintenance of body weight; stress and energy release; improves cardiovascular function; improves endurance; prevents muscle wasting that commonly occurs in the wings of captive birds; reduces cholesterol; and improves overall health, quality of life, and can increase life expectancy. And most importantly, ALLEVIATES STRESS! In addition, it stimulates the release of endorphins. These are the hormones produced by the body after exercise and result in the “runner’s high”. It is why we all feel good after we leave the gym. If your bird feels better, it will reduce the likelihood of picking and plucking. It will make for a happier bird. In addition, birds are very high energy animals. If they have a means of releasing this energy, they are less likely to be stressed and less likely to take out their pent up energy on themselves due to boredom. An exercised bird is a happier bird. Greg Glendell is a companion bird behaviorist and has some great articles written on how to safely teach your bird to fly, etc. He has written some wonderful books as well that may be beneficial in this situation as well.

  **Social Interactions:** Birds are flock animals and are very social. If your bird is currently living without an avian companion, consider adopting a bird for additional companionship. Have someone familiar with parrot introductions to assist you. Keep in mind, once an introduction is done, if all goes well, they may not want human interaction. This is ok. They have made a choice. Something most captive birds never get to do...is choose their own friends. Something to also keep in mind...many female birds are like female humans...it takes time to fall in love. So when introducing two birds, they may not immediately click. In fact, the female may want nothing to do with the male. It could take months for her to even accept him as a friend, let alone, a mate. Bird introductions is a whole other topic, and will be saved for another handout...Dr. Danoff pairs up all of her birds (and no she does not breed them), and some have immediately become friends and some have taken months for the females to accept the males.

  Spend time with your bird daily by providing love and the interactions that your bird desires. Many birds crave human interaction and love as well.

  **Night Night Places:** Night Night Places are a safe area for your bird to sleep in. Birds like to feel safe at night, and in the wild, many would be sleeping in nests inside tree trunks. They prefer not to be in open spaces. Options include bird tents; soft plush snuggly wraps that hang on the side of the cage or a large wooden hide box or nesting box. Wood boxes are also great for them to chew on and also snuggle in. Obow makes timothy hay tunnels and bungalows that they love as well! They can be filled with Carefresh bedding so they have something soft to rest on while they sleep.

  **Toys:** Provide several toys for your bird. Wood toys are inexpensive and allow for your bird to chew and shred which is a natural behavior. Avoid toys made of heavy metals. Stainless steel chains, bells, and locks are long lasting, do not rust, and will avoid heavy metal toxicities. Switch toys every few weeks to avoid boredom. Avoid excessive use of plastic toys (as they contain unhealthy chemicals are not environmentally friendly) and use toys that come from nature. Avoid dyed
wood because many dyes are carcinogenic (cause cancer). Vary toys between ones they can shred and also chew. Interactive toys are good too. Consider placing a television near your bird’s “home” to provide entertainment when left alone. Many love to watch Animal Planet. Consider setting your TV on a timer so that it goes on late morning and goes off at night before bed time. Keep your bird’s enclosure near a window or sliding glass door so they can view nature and other activities outside. (But keep the windows and doors shut if enclosure is going to be opened!)

**Housing:** Ideally a bird should not be housed in a cage. The stress of being confined in a cage can be devastating for some birds, and induce stress that causes feather picking, self-mutilation, and psychological disturbances. Consider dedicating a room in your home as a bird room where a cage can be left open the vast majority of the day or build your bird an aviary. Stainless steel cages and mesh are ideal for the same reasons as mentioned above, but are not required. Avoid cages made of zinc, iron, and other heavy metals. Place cage near a window when at all possible to provide for additional mental stimulation.

**Bathing:** Birds should be bathed once a week. You can take your bird in the shower with you, and is a great way of bonding. Or you can provide an appropriately sized “bird bath” in your bird’s enclosure. Wild Bird stores sell plastic bird baths with wooden bases that are great. Just NO copper bird baths-these are toxic! Misting a bird is ok as well, but does make many birds fearful. If you are going to mist, then please mist from above to simulate rain. They may dislike it in the beginning but they will likely accept it over time. Hopefully they will learn to enjoy it over, as most birds enjoy bathing if given the bathing “device” of their choice.

**Nutritional Supplements:**

- Organic Red Palm Oil (called Sunshine Factor by Avi-X) is a natural anti-inflammatory. It can be mixed in with pellets to avoid the stress of oral administration. It is also very high in antioxidants and omega-3 fatty acids (the latter are anti-inflammatory).

**Flights Suits Versus Collars**

We do not recommend the use of rigid collars. It results in a great deal of stress for most birds and restricts movement and many birds will not eat with their collars on. Since many birds mutilate from stress, applying a collar can be counter productive. An alternative is the flight suit and these can be found online. They essentially look like birdie vests that protect the body from plucking and mutilation.

If the feather picking does not improve within 2-3 months of strictly following the above suggestions, then a strict elimination diet should be attempted. This includes:

- HBD Adult Lifetime Mash and no other foods or treats for 8 weeks. This must be strictly adhered to, as even one bite of an allergenic food can cause itching and plucking, and would require you start at time zero again. If your bird refuses to eat this diet, then a home cooked diet can be prescribed.

**Additional treatments to consider:**

- Acupuncture or Aquapuncture
- Herbs
- Topically, use organic aloe gel made by Aloe Life. It is fragrance free and has no artificial colors or preservatives and is even safe for oral use. Clean wounds with cool water (as cool water is anti-inflammatory-no cold, just cool), and then apply the aloe 3-4 times per day.
- Aloe and Penetran Spray (analgesic properties) for itchiness: Mix 0.5 oz aloe to 1 tsp (5 mls) Penetran with one pint of water. The aloe should be pure aloe without artificial colorings, scents, etc. The solution can be sprayed on your bird’s itchy skin several times per day. Avoid spraying your bird’s head.

**Caution:** Any bird that is placed on a new diet must be closely monitored to avoid starvation. Special care should be taken when several birds are housed together as it can be difficult to determine how much each bird is eating. Ideally the
bird should weighed daily or at least every few days so any weight loss can be caught before the effects become life-threatening. If you have difficulty making the switch, consider having a veterinarian perform the switch for you where your bird can be closely monitored.

Kim Danoff, DVM, a Holistic Veterinarian runs her practice out of Vienna, Virginia. She can be reached at:

Paws To heal Veterinary Clinic
360 Maple Avenue West, Suites A&B
Vienna, Virginia 22180
(703) 938-2563
www.paws2heal.com