# Medication for Behavior Modification in Birds

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**KEYWORDS**

• Psittaciformes • Psychoactive drugs • Benzodiazepines • Tricyclic antidepressants • Serotonin reuptake inhibitors • Dopamine antagonists • Opioid antagonists • Hormone therapy

**KEY POINTS**

- Behavior modification therapy and provision of an appropriate living environment are key elements of management of problem behaviors in parrots.
- The use of behavior modifying drugs can be considered adjunct therapy under specific circumstances but only once a proper diagnosis has been established.
- Various classes of behavior modifying drugs exist. To enable selection of the most appropriate drug to use in an individual bird, a thorough diagnostic work-up is needed.
- Due to lack of information on safety and efficacy, psychoactive drugs should be used with caution and gradually titrated to effect.
- When available, therapeutic drug monitoring helps guide therapy, aiming to identify the most appropriate dose and resulting in the least number of side-effects.

## INTRODUCTION

Pharmacologic intervention with psychoactive or psychotropic drugs has been long-standing practice in human medicine to treat a variety of mental health issues (eg, schizophrenia, depression, bipolar disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder). Similarly, in veterinary medicine, these drugs have been used with increasing frequency to manage problem behaviors, such as anxiety, aggression, and compulsive behaviors. In addition to psychoactive drugs, hormones, antihistamines, analgesics, and anticonvulsant drugs are also used to alleviate behavior problems that are associated with increased levels of sex hormones, allergies, pain, and/or neurologic dysfunction (eg, epilepsy), respectively. When applied correctly, medication can aid in the treatment of abnormal pathologic behaviors (eg, stereotypic behaviors or those that lack impulse control), help stabilize a patient's emotional state (eg, in case of fear, anxiety, aggression, or hormonal imbalances), and improve its receptiveness to a behavior modification plan, thereby increasing the chances of a successful outcome.

Disclosure Statement: The author has nothing to disclose.
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Vet Clin Exot Anim 21 (2018) 115–149
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cvex.2017.08.005 **vetexotic.theclinics.com**
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Without proper diagnosis of the problem and adequate knowledge of behavior modification drugs (including their mechanism of action, appropriate uses, side effects, and interactions with other medications), however, veterinarians are likely to select an inappropriate drug or implement it incorrectly, which not only poses a risk of therapeutic failure but also can seriously harm a patient because of unintended drug interactions or side effects. Therefore, this article, aims to provide guidelines to the veterinary practitioner in the circumstances in which behavior modification drugs can or cannot be applied as well as provide an overview of the various medications currently used in the pharmacologic management of behavior problems in birds.

## BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS: WHEN TO PRESCRIBE AND WHEN NOT TO PRESCRIBE MEDICATION

Just like dogs and cats, parrots and other pet birds can exhibit problem behaviors that can be frustrating for owners and veterinarians to deal with. Some of the more common complaints concern aggression and biting, excessive vocalization (screaming), and feather-damaging and/or self-injurious behavior (**Figs. 1** and **2**).[1] In addition,

**Fig. 1.** Feather-damaging behavior (FDB), also referred to as feather-destructive behavior, feather plucking, feather picking, or pterotillomania, is one of the more common behavior problems seen in practice. Underlying causes can vary greatly for each individual case. Often a multifactorial origin is reported, in which various medical, genetic, psychological, neurobiologic, and socioenvironmental factors may play a role. (*Courtesy of* Nico Schoemaker, DVM, PhD, DECZM, DABVP-Avian, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands; Yvonne van Zeeland, DVM, MVR, PhD, DECZM, CPBC, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands.)

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