

Feather Loss and Feather Destructive Behavior in Pet Birds

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KEYWORDS

- Feather destructive behavior • Psittacine • Behavioral disorder • Feather-picking
- Avian behavior

KEY POINTS

- Feather loss is a complicated, multifactorial, and frustrating clinical presentation that should be considered a clinical disease presentation and not a diagnosis.
- Underlying etiologies and associated risk factors may include medical, environmental, nutritional, and psychological components.
- A comprehensive history and medical workup are essential when approaching the bird with feather loss.
- If psychogenic FDB is involved, various enrichment resources are available to create a more stimulating environment.
- A discussion of the environmental and psychological needs of pet birds is an essential but frequently overlooked part of all “new bird” visits.

Feather loss is one of the more common and frustrating reasons that avian patients are presented to veterinary hospitals. Several factors make the treatment of feather loss difficult. The initial problem lies in the relative scarcity of controlled studies related to the underlying causes of feather loss in companion avian species and the paucity of current veterinary medical knowledge regarding feather loss and feather destructive behavior (FDB). Although many medical and environmental conditions have been associated with FDB, few have been proven to be causal. Wherever possible, this article references applicable controlled studies, although they are few. Elsewhere, review articles and conference proceedings are referenced, with personal observations referred to as necessary.

The initial clinical dilemma facing the practitioner is determining if the feather loss is intrinsic or due to FDB. Pet birds are often left unobserved for long periods of time, which limits the owner's ability to observe FDB. Additionally, owners may be unable to distinguish normal preening behavior from overt feather destruction.

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Although definitions vary, for the purposes of this article, intrinsic feather loss will refer to feather loss that is either not self-inflicted or is the result of normal preening of abnormal feathers. FDB will be defined as self-inflicted feather loss, damage, or destruction, regardless of etiology. If it can be determined that the feather loss is self-induced, the next step is determining if this FDB has a primary medical etiology, involves husbandry and/or nutritional issues, is psychogenic in origin, or, as is often the case, includes a combination of factors.

If environmental factors and medical conditions associated with feather loss and destruction can be reasonably ruled out, determining the underlying triggers and reinforcing factors that may perpetuate psychogenic FDB can be complicated and time consuming. Limitations include the accuracy of the owner's observations and his or her willingness to learn and commit to behavioral enrichment and modification techniques. This article will discuss the more common causes and risk factors associated with feather loss, both with and without FDB, as well as treatment options.

Missing or damaged feathers warrant a comprehensive review of husbandry, as well as a medical workup and behavioral assessment (Fig. 1). The first step is a thorough anamnesis. Because of the need for extensive questioning regarding diet, husbandry, and behavior, a prepared questionnaire can be E-mailed or faxed to the owner before the office visit. By previewing a thought-provoking, problem-specific questionnaire, the owner should be able to present more thoughtful and accurate responses, and allow the practitioner time to review the information. Examples of these extensive questionnaires relating to abnormal feather problems affecting companion avian species have been published.¹

The enclosure type (size, material), location (indoor, outdoor), and the presence or absence of cage mates or adjacently housed birds should be investigated. The current and previous diet, both what is offered and what is actually consumed, also should be determined by the attending clinician.

Unless an obvious reason for feather damage can be ascertained when taking the patient history (eg, excessively small cage damaging the rectrices) and signalment (eg, the characteristic bald spot of Lutino cockatiels), or while performing the physical examination (eg, an obese budgerigar with alopecia over the breast), a medical workup is indicated. Generally, a complete blood count, plasma chemistry panel



Fig. 1. A common presentation of birds with FDB is a normally feathered head with a complete lack of feathers on the rest of the body.

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