

Feather Destructive Behavior

Finding Solutions (Part One)



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This issue's contributor, **Pamela Clark**, is a well-known author, speaker, and parrot behaviour consultant whose experience with parrots dates back 40 years to the purchase of her first pair of lovebirds. Her special interests include feather destructive behaviour, training, flight and nutrition.

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CLEO WAS JUST 13 MONTHS OLD when I first met her – a perfect feminine African Grey head perched atop a scruffy body – most feathers removed including her tail and primary flight feathers. Her caregiver came to me distressed and feeling guilty, unsure of what was wrong and desperate to help his beloved grey.

Feather destructive behavior (FDB) has become quite common among companion parrots. It has also become a widely accepted behavior – just “something that captive parrots do.” Caregivers, frustrated by their unsuccessful attempts to stop the behavior, instead capitulate into acceptance, reassuring themselves that at least the parrot seems happy and healthy otherwise. This is a case of the “bad becoming normal,” to borrow a phrase from author and respected behavior expert Temple Grandin. When any parrot destroys his own feathers, it is a sign that something is wrong and intervention is needed. While not every case of FDB can be resolved, many can by performing an holistic, comprehensive examination of every aspect of the parrot's life and making improvements where indicated.

The definition of FDB, a.k.a. feather picking, is any self-inflicted destruction of feathers. This may include pulling

feathers out completely with the beak or feet, chewing them off at the body, barbering (snipping away small pieces), or shredding the barbules off of the central shaft. It does not include self-mutilation (chewing into the skin itself to create a wound). While feather destruction and self-mutilation can occur in the same individual, FDB does not necessarily lead to self-mutilation.

Frequently, solutions elude caregivers because there is not a full recognition of the complexity of the problem. In most cases, several factors work together to push the bird over the edge into this extreme behavior. There is usually also a trigger, a particular event that initiates the behavior. For example, as it turned out Cleo had been weaned too early onto a seed-based diet, was given a too-short wing trim, and did not receive the enrichment that would have led to the development of behavioral independence. At age six months, the owner left for an extended period, leaving her with an unfamiliar caregiver,

Feather Destructive Behavior, commonly termed “feather picking,” is any self-inflicted destruction of feathers. Whilst it has come to be accepted by many caregivers, it is a sign that something is wrong and intervention is needed.



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at which time she began chewing off feathers. The owner’s absence was blamed, when in fact it was the other conditions and experiences that predisposed Cleo to developing the problem.

Risk factors for FDB can be divided into medical vs. non-medical causes. I often hear the term “behavioral” used to describe an individual’s feather destruction. However, this term is useless and should be avoided. We know that feather destruction is a behavior. Therefore, this label tells us nothing and does in fact bring us to a dead end, in terms of identifying possible solutions.

Medical causes can include (1) infection (bacterial, viral, fungal or parasitic), (2) metabolic disorders (liver disease), (3) endocrine conditions (thyroid dysfunction), (4) tumors, or (5) metal toxicity. Non-medical causes include (1) inappropriate diet, (2) chronic stress or anxiety, (3) increased production of reproductive hormones, (4) lack of independent play skills that leads to boredom or overdependence upon the owner, (5) inadequate bathing opportunities, (6) lack of adequate rest, (7) insufficient exercise, (8) insufficient opportunity for learning and making choices, (9) lack of foraging and other

“discovery” opportunities, (10) lack of access to fresh air and sunshine, and (11) foreign substances on feathers or exposure to toxic materials, such as cigarette smoke. Even if your parrot is not currently damaging his feathers, any of these factors, if present, should be corrected now, in order to prevent the problem from occurring in the future.

Certain clues as to cause can be derived by observing where on the body the behavior begins and when it occurs during the day. A parrot who starts chewing off wing and tail feathers, or who barbers feathers, is likely doing so for non-medical reasons. A parrot who destroys feathers over the torso could be doing so for either non-medical or medical reasons. A parrot who destroys feathers only at night when supposed to be asleep may, in fact, be suffering from a physical ailment that causes discomfort when the distractions of the day are no longer present.

Regardless of any such clues, the first step to resolving a FDB problem must be to have a thorough work-up done by an avian veterinarian experienced with this problem. If you take your parrot to a vet and no diagnostic testing is recommended, seek a second opinion. It is not possible to rule out medical

causes by simply doing a physical exam. While there is no recognized protocol for working up a feather picking parrot, typical testing might include a complete blood count, chemistry panel, Gram stain or culture and sensitivity, fecal analysis and possibly radiographs.

After ruling out medical causes, the best chance at resolution is to then examine each of the areas listed below and to make improvements where necessary.

Diet and Nutrition: Parrots eating a seed mix as a staple in the diet, or who regularly consume relatively high amounts of fat and carbohydrates, are at risk for FDB. Seed mixes contain insufficient amounts of vitamin A to support the immune system, and are so high in fat as to predispose a parrot to conditions like fatty liver disease. You must transition the parrot from the seed mix onto a high-quality formulated diet and then supplement with a moderate amount of live, raw, fresh foods, with the focus on vegetables, greens, and grains. Teaching a parrot to eat a better diet is just that – a training issue. If not able to make this transition successfully on your own, then seek the assistance of a professional who knows how to do so effectively without causing the parrot undue stress in the process.



Feather destruction may include pulling feathers out completely with the beak or feet, chewing them off at the body, snipping away small pieces (barbering), or shredding the barbules off of the central shaft.

The overall amount of fats and carbohydrates in the diet must be limited. Parrots are instinctively “programmed” to load up on these foods. This serves them well in the wild, where energy expenditures are significant. However, in captivity these same parrots easily become carbohydrate “junkies” demanding daily their ration of white rice, mashed potatoes, fruit and pasta. The best rule of thumb is to avoid feeding any food that contains white flour, that has any form of sugar listed in the first five ingredients, or that contains any trans fat. Very sweet fruits, such as bananas and grapes, should be avoided in favor of those that offer better nutrition, such as berries.

Chronic Stress and Anxiety: All companion parrots experience some stress because they are captive, living in a state of chronic restraint. This stress can be increased dangerously by many conditions present in our homes. These range from remodeling projects, threats from other parrots, cages placed in front of windows, the presence of rodents at night, to an inability to fly away from perceived threats if the wings are trimmed. A thorough and objective analysis of the environment must be undertaken to identify causes of stress. Then, practical changes should be made where possible, without becoming

overprotective of the parrot. If a friend visits wearing a hat and the parrot is afraid of the hat, you would have the friend remove it. Hats are not necessary to quality of life for a parrot. On the other hand, if a new toy creates a fear reaction, you will need to implement a desensitization plan allowing him to get used to looking at it first, then finally learn that it has entertainment value.

A significant source of stress for most companion parrots is their inability to fly. A parrot who cannot move about at will is not able to make the steady stream of behavioral choices that is his birthright, and knows instinctively that, should danger manifest, he is unable to get away.

It is my hope, as we move into a more modern and benevolent manner of caring for companion parrots, that each parrot will be evaluated as a candidate for flight and that having flighted parrots indoors will one day be the norm, as it is in other countries. Certainly, there is risk in the home for a flighted parrot, but there is also risk for parrots whose wings are clipped. Maintaining a flighted bird can be done safely through wise arrangement of the environment and effective training within the home. Transitioning a clipped parrot to a flighted status

should be done with the help of a professional who lives successfully with flighted birds.

Production of Reproductive Hormones:

This is perhaps the most common factor contributing to FDB in adult parrots. Wild parrots naturally live in a hormonally inactive state for most of the year. They are triggered into a reproductive status when environmental conditions converge that support breeding and rearing young. Unfortunately, these same triggers are often present continually in our homes. The primary triggers caregivers provide that increase production of reproductive hormones are: (1) the presence of a pair bond (usually between the parrot and a human in the home), (2) the ability to engage in interactions of an affectionate nature with that bonded one (cuddling, stroking down the back and under the wings, shoulder time), (3) the presence of a perceived nesting area (access to closets, drawers, cupboards, sleeping huts, cardboard boxes, etc.), (4) a nutrient-dense diet that contains too many carbohydrates and fats, or too much food overall, and (5) a degree of sameness to the environment (no challenges to accept new experiences). An additional trigger can be the presence nearby of other parrots also in a reproductively active state.



Recovery is possible! This is the same bird pictured on page 14 with feather destruction completely resolved. Resolution first requires a thorough analysis of every aspect of the parrot's life.

Increased hormone production is a fundamental and primary problem that leads to several problem behaviors, in addition to FDB. Therefore, making changes in this area is critical. If you think your parrot has developed a pair bond with you, try to evolve that bond through reducing time on the shoulder, reducing and then eliminating cuddling. Instead engage in trick training or other activities that will cause your bird to relate to you in a different manner. Also discourage any sexual behaviors, such as regurgitation or rubbing of the vent against clothing or hands, by relocating the parrot to another perch and redirecting him to more appropriate behavior.

Many caregivers provide cardboard boxes, empty out drawers, or allow their parrots to play in closets out of the perception that this makes the parrot very happy. It does. Parrots get very excited at the opportunity to even sit in perceived nesting areas. However, this must be consistently discouraged. A parrot allowed access to such areas will not only suffer the attendant surge in hormone production that such exciting activities trigger, but will soon begin to display a form of territoriality

about these areas that often becomes quite inconvenient for the owner who wants to get another pair of shoes out of the closet.

Bathing, Fresh Air & Sunshine: I will discuss these together because all contribute greatly to feather quality. Many cases of feather damaging behavior can be improved simply by increasing bathing opportunities. Parrots should be bathed in the morning so that they have plenty of time to dry before going to bed at night. A daily bath can be provided to those parrots who enjoy this. At minimum, a weekly bath should be encouraged. Access to an outdoor aviary where the parrot will experience wind, rain and sun will also help to encourage normal preening.

Rest: Requirements for rest vary among individuals and species. Young parrots, or those originally from the New World, are likely to need at least ten hours of sleep a night. Adult African Greys and some cockatoos often do well with only eight to nine hours of rest. Caregivers must use common sense in this area and realize that, while we can extend day length artificially, our parrots would naturally be sleeping during the hours of darkness.

Exercise: A parrot allowed flight will exercise himself naturally. Encouraging exercise for parrots with clipped wings can be challenging. However, certain hanging perches can help. Examples are the *Spring Swing* (encourages flapping) from www.motherpluckinbirdtoys.com and the *Get A Grip* (encourages climbing) from www.estarbird.com. Some parrots will enjoy playing fetch or hide and seek on the floor.

Foreign or Toxic Substances: Caregivers must maintain an awareness that substances transferred onto feathers by hands can be unpleasant for parrots. Avoid snacking while petting your parrot. Wash hands thoroughly every time after smoking. If you shower with your parrot, make sure that all soap and shampoo is rinsed thoroughly from his feathers before leaving the shower.

Next Steps: Once you have evaluated the areas detailed above and made changes where needed, it is time to tackle the single most important area for a successful resolution of the problem – behavior modification and training. This includes providing appropriate enrichment and then teaching the parrot to stay busy which will be discussed in **PART TWO** of this article, which will appear in the next issue of *PsittaScene*.



Feather Destructive Behavior Finding Solutions (Part Two)



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PART ONE OF THIS ARTICLE (*PsittaScene* 23.4 November 2011) examined the most common causes of feather destructive behavior (FDB) and ways to make improvements to diet, environment and social relationships as steps to resolving the problem. PART TWO focuses on the provision of enrichment, behavior modification and training to further address FDB.

It is often stated that FDB becomes a habit. It is more helpful to realize that, over time, the behavior begins to have value to the parrot. If it did not, it would not continue. This recognition helps us to understand that a parrot will be more likely to give up this behavior if he learns that alternate behaviors bring greater reinforcement or enjoyment. For this, we can implement both short-term and long-term behavior modification strategies.

ENRICHMENT: First, the environment must offer adequate opportunities for interaction. Many people tell me that their parrots won't play with toys. My reaction? This can and must be changed. Lack of independent play behavior is one of the greatest risk factors for the development of FDB.

The first step is to provide enrichment items that elicit curiosity in the parrot

and that offer a reward for interaction. Parrots especially like items that are easily destroyed or that offer 'discovery' (foraging) opportunities. If your parrot is one who prefers feathers to toys, you will likely need to experiment to find items that he is moved to investigate. Larger parrots sometimes prefer toys made for smaller birds. For others, projects created at home from paper and cardboard are of more interest. Luckily, many on-line stores now offer a wide variety of foraging toys.

Provide a variety of different 'destroy and discover' items to determine what piques your parrot's interest. This might be something very simple in the beginning, such as a whole roll of white unscented toilet paper hung in the cage. This common item offers the same opportunity for 'snipping' as feathers do. A wonderful resource is Kris Porter's Parrot Enrichment Activity Books,



Presenting a variety of treats and surprises in “puzzle feeders” (like this homemade one using plastic caps) or in rolls of paper, boxes and egg cartons can provide wonderful opportunities for foraging and discovery. Birds quickly learn to view these new offerings with eager anticipation.

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available for download free of charge at www.parrotenrichment.com. Try to provide something new each day to trigger curiosity. You will also need a variety of foot toys for the distraction technique described below.

DESENSITIZATION: If your parrot is afraid of new toys, you will need to first desensitize him to anything that you want to provide. To do so, place the new toy at enough of a distance from the cage that you observe no fear reaction from your bird. Each day or week, depending on your bird’s reaction, move it a short distance closer. When you can put the toy near the cage without worrying your parrot, attach it to the outside of the cage down low. Once he has had a chance to get used to looking at it there, move it up higher. If you have moved at your bird’s pace, you will be able to then put it into the cage without his becoming concerned. Once he has become accustomed to your providing new things regularly, you may find that you can introduce new things more quickly.

DISTRACTION AND REDIRECTION: Any behavior that gets a reward will occur more often in the future. Therefore, if

you are giving your parrot attention for chewing or pulling feathers, you are actually reinforcing this behavior. It is important to overtly and completely ignore the behavior. The following distraction technique often helps to break down the behavior over time if implemented consistently:

- When you notice that your parrot is engaged in feather destruction, ostensibly ignore him, but create some sort of auditory or visual distraction, such as tapping a spoon against a pan. He should have no idea that this distraction is in any way related to his activities. Do not scare him; the goal is to get him to stop chewing feathers and look up to identify the cause of the interruption.

- As soon as he looks up, reinforce him with a verbal marker, such as “Good, Cleo!”

- Immediately approach him and offer him a small foot toy or other item of interest.

- If he takes the item and begins to play with it, praise him and walk away.

- If he takes it and drops it immediately, or will not take it at all, step him up and transfer him to another perch.

- Begin again...this method requires a consistent approach. If you are able to do this for long enough, you will effectively help to break his pattern.

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION AND TRAINING: The parrot who entertains himself with his feathers is often a parrot who sits in one place all day and will not interact with enrichment items. By using positive reinforcement to teach new behaviors, you can increase ten-fold your chances of resolving the FDB.

Before beginning any training with your parrot, you must first identify reinforcers (rewards) that he highly values. Generally speaking, the best reinforcers are often food rewards, such as small pieces of nuts or seeds. If you don’t know what your parrot likes, you can perform a ‘treat interview.’ Identify 5 to 7 different treats that you think he might value and that would be convenient to keep handy in your pocket. Place a small piece of each into a dish and offer this at a time when he’s hungry. Watch to see



what he chooses first, second and third. These then become your training treats. Do not offer them at any other time.

TEACHING YOUR PARROT TO PLAY WITH TOYS: Once you have provided plenty of new things in and on the cage and in any other areas where your parrot spends time, you will need to watch for opportunities to reward any interest he shows in them. Don't watch him like a hawk, but remain aware of his activities. To do so, his cage will need to be located in your living area. If your parrot lives in a bird room, you will not have enough opportunities to reward the desirable behaviors he displays. When he shows any interest at all in one of the enrichment items, respond immediately with a "Good!" and walk over to offer one of your food treats. He will soon learn that interacting with the toys you have provided earns him a highly valued reward. In the beginning you may have to reward just sitting next to a toy, but you can gradually increase the criteria for earning a treat to including some form of interaction. If you have done a good job of providing interesting items, he will soon learn that interacting with them brings its own rewards.

REWARDING CUED BEHAVIORS: We often expect our parrots to step up or return

to their cages just because we ask them to. In truth, these are behaviors that we should be rewarding. When we don't, compliance often diminishes over time. When working with a parrot who damages his feathers, we shouldn't overlook opportunities just to reward these cued behaviors. When you ask him to step up and he does, tell him "Good!" and offer a small treat or head scratch, if that's what he prefers. Do the same when asking him to step back off of you, especially if he's stepping off of your shoulder onto your hand – a behavior that many parrots resist. When you return him to his cage, offer a treat. If this is something that he doesn't want to do, make sure that the value of your treat is a little higher. This simple practice will cause him to look to you for guidance and reinforcement and will set the stage for teaching new behaviors.

TEACHING NEW BEHAVIORS: Our intelligent parrots need learning opportunities for greatest psychological health. By teaching new behaviors, you accomplish three important things. First, if your parrot is one who has developed a pair bond with you, this practice will help to evolve your bond into

a more appropriate one. Parrots offer the behaviors that make the most sense within the context of the bond they have with you. If your parrot has a pair bond with you, he will offer the behaviors that make sense within that context, such as regurgitation. If you interact with him as a teacher, he will begin slowly to offer more behaviors that make sense within that context. Second, he will become more alert, oriented outwardly to the environment, as he learns that he has increased opportunities for earning the things he likes. Third, the new behaviors you teach will help to gradually replace the feather damaging behaviors.

As you decide what to teach first, you can consider both trick training and husbandry training. As the number of parrots doing tricks on YouTube can attest, many caregivers have discovered just how much fun trick training can be. This type of training need only take five to ten minutes a day of your time. Best results will be obtained by teaching a simple behavior, like targeting, first (targeting is simply the act of touching the beak to an object). By focusing first on a simple behavior, you allow the parrot to become familiar with the process of learning in this manner. It will also allow you to better perfect your timing and technique before you

◀ Foot toys are small and intriguing for parrots to hold in their foot and investigate. A myriad of styles are available for purchase (example far left) or make your own like this one (left) made from drinking straws.

Offering your parrot the opportunity to learn new behaviors has significant benefits for both of you. From tricks like a wave to husbandry behaviors like entering a carrier, training is another tool that can significantly reduce problem behaviors like destroying feathers. ▶



go on to teach something more complex. Many excellent resources are now available to help you get started. Jenny Drummey offers helpful training videos free of charge at www.projectparrot.com. Barbara Heidenreich's excellent training DVDs and book can be purchased at www.parrots.org. Once you have taught targeting, you can use this skill to teach other behaviors, such as turning around or going into a carrier on cue.

TEACHING HUSBANDRY BEHAVIORS is another way to expand your parrot's horizons and make his care easier at the same time. Ideas include teaching him to take a shower, wear a harness, allow his nails to be filed, or go into a carrier when asked. Begin by assessing your parrot's skills. What do you wish you could do with him that you can't do now?

Often, this type of training must begin with desensitization – first allowing him to get used to the sight of whatever it is you are introducing. If you want to teach him to take a shower in the bathroom, you might first have to get him used just to being in there, or to teach him to step down onto the shower perch. Carrier training might begin first just with

bringing it into the room and letting him get used to looking at it. Teaching him to accept a nail file or harness might begin with pairing treats with each of these items. Decide what you want to teach and then break this down into small steps. If you need personal help, identify a professional who has hands-on experience with training who can consult with you by telephone.

Feather destructive behavior is a problem that can be resolved. Even if a full resolution of the problem eludes you, by taking the steps outlined in parts one and two of this article, you will improve your parrot's quality of life. Begin by ruling out medical causes by scheduling a visit with an avian vet who has experience with the problem. Next evaluate diet, sources of stress, and triggers for reproductive hormones, making changes where indicated. Increase opportunities for bathing, exercise, and access to a safe outdoor enclosure. Make sure your parrot is getting adequate rest. Discover the types of things that interest him and provide daily enrichment. Lastly, discover the power of positive reinforcement to change existing behaviors. Reward your parrot for

interacting with toys or performing the behaviors you request. Enrich his life by teaching him something new. If the changes you need to make seem too difficult, contact a professional experienced with this problem who can help you to work through these steps.

Do you remember Cleo, the African Grey I mentioned in Part One? Her caregiver, beset with personal difficulties, struggled with making the necessary changes to her care and she continued to damage her feathers until she went to her second home. Her new owner improved her diet, eliminating all the snack food she had previously enjoyed and taught her to eat a high-quality pellet supplemented with fresh vegetables. She also taught her to bathe and to interact with enrichment items. After three years, her new owner wrote the following: "Even though you had told me that it was possible that Cleo might stop mutilating her feathers in a new environment, I never expected such a stunning turnaround. It's been a gradual process; at times it seemed like she was taking two steps forward and one step backward, but the overall progress is there to see in the photo log we've kept." I include this example as proof that this problem can resolve through steady and consistent effort. What are you waiting for?

