

Toenail Tips for Parrot Keepers

By EB Cravens

A most important segment of parrot anatomy are the eight minute toenails—those tiny pointed nubs of horny keratin which make furthest and first strong contact with any environmental perching surface. Healthy pet psittacines have healthy toenails. They need them for a wide variety of uses.

Accordingly, the ways we care for and groom our birds' nails are extremely important. The question of how and when to clip a captive hookbill's toenails pose a particular dilemma for the natural birdkeeper. By all rights, provided nutritional balance is correct, a bird's claws resting on proper materials with adequate activity will groom themselves. Our favorite perch materials are rough barked logs. Not only do nails wear down normally on such sites, but most psittacines will learn to enjoy chewing on this bark, especially when it is fresh, thus grooming the beak. While plastic perches hold some appeal to non-natural birdkeepers, even when roughened up, they are extremely hard for some young or weak-footed parrots to grip, and do little to groom nails naturally. Slick, iron-hard manzanita wood, though better than plastic, is the same. I have seen pet birds placed upon such perches after a nail trim, fumble as if on a rolling log and fall to the cage bottom.

In addition, many owners allow their parrots to spend a significant amount of their waking hours perched on top of their cage. Feet continually wrapped around wire surfaces do not wear down at all. If your bird likes being up there, carefully tie or clamp a length of log on top to provide a better perch. I do not use dowels at all in my aviaries believing bark acts as a mini-massage to psittacines' feet.

The same is true if your parrot constantly crawls along the wire of her cage to get from perch to perch. 'Tis very unnatural and without any grooming advantages. Run a wooden branch along the same wall or from the lower corner angling up to the top to encourage the pet to "walk on wood."

One mistake made by novice owners is to always offer the same size narrow perches to their pets, when, in fact various diameters groom nails slightly differently. I use logs of four to six inches diameter to force parrot toenails to rest on top of the rough bark instead of always wrapping around. Note where your bird habitually perches and climbs. We have even utilized large river rocks or flat flagstones with treats placed in the middle to entice psittacines to walk on them and wear down sharp nails

Cement and Plaster Perches

A word about cement and plaster grooming perches:

We recognize and occasionally recommend these fine innovations for use with pet parrots. But they must be used thoughtfully. If a bird perches and sleeps constantly on such a "stone" perch because it is placed up high or is the only choice available, there is danger of his developing raw or abraded feet pads. We counsel such perches be used periodically when claws are overly-sharp, then removed after several weeks until again needed. Now, when I clip my bird's nails short, I am accepting certain negative effects on the pet. Shortened nails cause a sudden loss in gripping ability and potential balance. My opinion is a vast majority of household parrots, having been handfed, poorly fledged, prematurely wing clipped, and limited in flight and choice of assorted

landing sites, are weak in foot strength. This means that they rely more heavily on toenail length and sharpness to grip and perch. I fully doubt if many hand raised amazons, greys or macaws have the ability to jump-flap to an upright broom handle to perch, since they were never allowed to develop the strength and technique to recognize a vertical perch and go to it.

In the case of overweight and baby birds, severely trimmed nails can lead to injuries from falling. Notably bulky, clumsy, and slow-to-fledge species such as the red-tailed greys, eclectus, large amazons, and Moluccan and Umbrella Cockatoos should never have their toenails abruptly cut short! Fledgling chicks need needle-sharp nails which help them to cling nimbly in the oddest places. (By one toenail from a picture frame, for example, after an uncoordinated flight attempt!) We find absolutely no reason for trimming a baby bird's toenails before the chick is fully fledged and weaned and adept at climbing and landing.

Where basic climbing skills are concerned the most unimportant toenails are the numbers #1 and #4 toes respectively, in a psittacine's zygodactyl foot arrangement—that is the two rear toes. These two nails must support the major weight of each leg when a parrot is climbing head downwards; and since the #1 toe is the weakest, should it be clipped short, the bird will be effectively reduced to a near 3/4 grip capacity. Truly many poorly skilled hookbill pets show a significant hesitation to climb straight down, and instead prefer to back down in a zigzag fashion, relying on large front toes and beak to support their bulk.

It is of note that unclipped toenails can also be a natural emergency defense against a predator. I have seen cornered parrots on the ground roll over on their backs, balance on slightly extended wings, and slash with fully opened claws, while snapping with beak to fend off a curious and threatening feline!

Several Grooming Considerations

When a decision is made to trim a psittacine's toenails, there are several considerations. First, the bird must be caught and held firmly, most likely against its will. This is a very stressful experience, often causing the bird's heart to beat extra-rapidly. We have heard of heart failure in wild-caught breeder birds subjected to such grooming. Two persons should always cooperate to clip a resistant parrot's claws—one to hold the bird gently but firmly under a towel on a flat surface, the other to pull each foot in turn from under the towel and clip the nails. I also developed the habit of holding the bird upright beneath the cloth when trimming, since few parrots are comfortable with strangers when on their backs.

The owner or helper would hold the bird in the dark and gently roll it to one leg while I gripped the other leg and cut any long nails. Then the other foot. This technique of upright work seemed to lessen the incidents of claw "fist-clenching" which can be a nail-trimmer's nightmare...

If a person doing the nail clip is inexperienced or inattentive, he or she may cut too deeply into the nail's quick, that area of live nerves and blood supply leading back into the toe. This causes the bird to cry out or flinch, and believe me, just as in humans, to cut too deep and draw blood hurts!!!

Ever wonder why your pet gets nervous around the nail groomer when he has had previous visits with “ouch” and quick-stop blood coagulant? Some of those powders even burn, unlike flour or corn starch.

When a parrot’s toenail is examined closely in a strong flashlight, it will be possible to see where the living tissue inside tapers off toward the tip. I like to wear magnifying glasses. This is the spot beyond which to clip painlessly, just as one would clip the white off one’s own toenail. When a bird comes in with a truly overgrown curved nail, it should be cut back in stages, allowing the quick to recede over several weeks before cutting shorter. The ideal length leaves a nail which curves down to about a 75 degree angle from the plane of the toe.

Continuously overgrown nails not only suggest a lack of natural grooming exercise, but may indicate an imbalance in a bird’s diet or a problem in the specialized cells programmed to form the horny fibrous protein (keratin) which makes up beak and nails. These are not common indications unless a bird also has a constantly overgrown beak. There is also some evidence that large psittacines which undergo frequent short nail trims (i.e. 4-6 times annually, etc.) will develop thicker, horny nails rather than the delicately tapering ones of birds never claw-clipped. Of course the most natural way is to not clip at all...

A favorite accomplishment of mine is to not have clipped any of my flocks’ nails in the past 20+ years! It only takes imagination and problem solving to set up an environment where your bird grooms its own nails naturally. Isn’t this what aviculture is all about?

If the hookbill can fly, landings on rough wood surfaces are a most excellent way of naturally grooming toenails. The same is true for ground-favoring species like Australian parakeets, cockatoos, lorikeets, who love to scratch and dig in clean sand or gravel trays.

Some pet owners have trained their birds to tolerate (even enjoy!) a routine of filing claws with an emery board every few weeks while sitting in the keeper’s lap. If a parrot always becomes seriously stressed by a trip to the vet or pet shop, consider a nail clip outcall or asking a friend with experience to come over and help do your birds.

Pets who hold grudges should be taken out of the cage and placed under the towel at night in a low lighted room for trimming, after which they are immediately released from the towel back into their cage to remain until morning. Usually they react as if nothing happened.

And finally, it is important to observe that toenail growth, like feather molt, occurs in spurts and seasons, and that needle-sharp points usually last only a few weeks. In the mean time, you can do as I do for my pets’ sake: retreat beneath a thick sweatshirt.