

# P·E·T Pages

*PsittaScene's* PET Pages help you provide the very best for your bird by focusing on Parrot behaviour, Enrichment and Training.



This issue's contributor Jim McKendry has spent many years rehabilitating Gang-Gang Cockatoos that have feather chewed. This female was once completely flightless and is now fully feathered.

Jim is one of our online experts and answered this question on "Ask an Expert" on our website. He works full-time teaching science at St. Teresa's Catholic College in Queensland, Australia. He has worked professionally with birds as a presentations keeper at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary and provides parrot behaviour and enrichment consultation services via his website at [www.pbec.com.au](http://www.pbec.com.au).

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## Feather Picking Frustrations

We have two African Grey parrots. Peaches is three years old and Vincent is 11 months old. Both birds have their own cages and a quiet room to sleep in, away from the family. They have an average of 10-12 hours sleep each night. Their diet is a mixture of pellets, seed, fresh fruit, vegetables, the occasional treat and a supplement of palm nut oil. They are showered once a week and sprayed every other day. Both have free flight time when we are home and are out of their cages with the family for a minimum of 5 hours, but often eight hours or more.

Peaches is healthy, happy and well adjusted. Unfortunately, Vincent started plucking his breast feathers when he was 8 months old. We visited the vet, who advised us it was not medical. We have checked all the common environmental and diet-related causes to no avail. His feathers are starting to grow back but occasionally he appears to pluck these out, usually when I go out! This tells me it's likely to be abandonment stress but how do I overcome this? I have tried to give him treats or toys before I go out, we leave a radio on for both birds who are both in the same room for company but in different cages.

I have also noticed that Vincent appears to be rather possessive and often objects when I hold Peaches or when anyone come close to me. We have tried to discourage this by asking the family to interact with him more. He will go to them but often only for a few minutes before he flies to me. Is this an age thing as he is still a baby?

Please help as we feel so responsible and want Vincent to be as happy and well adjusted as Peaches is.

*Jo*

G'day Jo,

Without a doubt, trying to manage feather picking behaviour is the most challenging of the behavioural issues we encounter in captive parrots. It is very difficult for me to cover all the bases in writing for an issue as potentially complex as feather picking. Not being able to actually see the environment or observe Peaches, will limit my response to generalisations. Nevertheless, I have extensive first hand experience with this particular issue as a consultant and I can certainly cover some food for thought from the insights you have shared. Hopefully that will help you develop some strategies to minimise the feather picking behaviour.

Firstly, you've done the right thing by consulting a veterinarian first. My advice to clients managing any problems involving poor feathering or feather damage in their parrots is



African Grey Parrots are particularly prone to establishing feather picking behaviours in unenriched environments.

to seek veterinary advice first. All the behavioural intervention in the world won't help a parrot that is physically ill. As you have sought veterinary advice and have been advised that the problem is behavioural, let's focus on the key general areas that you can start considering.

## Diet & Foraging

Scientific studies have demonstrated a significant disparity between wild and captive parrots in the time spent actively engaged in foraging and feeding behaviours. Reduced active foraging can be considered a precursor to "boredom" or lack of activity. This activity deficit has been linked to excessive amounts of time spent preening by captive parrots, which of course has been linked to improper care of feathers over time. The more dynamic, variable and creative you can be in presenting food, the longer the parrot will need to spend "foraging." This strategy has been used for decades in the zoo industry to reduce stereotypical behaviours in a range of animal species. The relevance for our companion parrots should be obvious.

Diet management involves more than just withholding favoured foods for training treats. Creative diet management for parrots focuses on a range of goals. Initially, it is beneficial to establish a formulated diet as the daily base for food consumption. Then supplement this with a range of other food types, including fruit, vegetables, seeds, natural foliage and even live foods such as mealworms. The composition ratio of each of these supplements should be considered at a species-specific level. Not only will a diet based on a formulated food provide sound nutrition whilst minimising fat intake, it will also enhance the parrot's motivation to forage for more palatable items such as nuts and seeds.

You have described a good diet for your African Greys. However, we often stop at ensuring all nutritional bases are covered, without taking the next step and considering the "when" and "how"

of delivering the food. Ideally, time spent feeding (a behaviour that is incompatible with sitting around picking at feathers) is maximised. This may be particularly important at times when we are not around to provide the alternative stimuli needed to redirect feather picking behaviour.

Diet management therefore extends to catering for food allocation at various times of the day. Most parrot species do not feed for only an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon as some articles claim. Feeding durations of up to 8 hours and at all times of the day have been observed in the wild. Therefore we may need to consider catering for the natural tendency to forage outside of an established captive feeding regime. From your description, you may have the ability to feed Peaches and Vincent around those times when you leave the house. By doing this you are introducing a stimulus that is likely to offer a highly motivating alternative to feather picking when you are absent.

In my experience, creative food delivery still has limitations in the remediation of feather picking. Best results for providing alternatives to chewing on feathers are usually derived from the provision of natural foraging "browse". This requires a species-specific understanding of parrots and an appreciation of the huge variability in foraging behaviours and preferences. What works as a foraging motivator



Photo: © Arlene Alpar

Great ideas such as delivering food in foraging toys rather than open bowls can reduce boredom and feather picking behaviour.



Photo: © Jim McKendry

Providing natural foraging browse, such as the *Allocasuarina* cones eagerly taken by this Gang-Gang Cockatoo, offers the most effective redirection for feather chewing behaviour for many species.

for one species, or even one individual, may not work for another. In any case, if the daily food intake is staggered it is important to provide natural foraging opportunities outside of those times. This can reduce boredom, stress and anxiety due to separation, and relieve pressures associated with behavioural feather picking.

Many parrot owners simply don't have access to suitable, natural foraging items. In these cases, we need to reflect on the suitability of the artificial enrichment and toys being provided. A lot of the traditional parrot toys lack functional relevance for the birds they are provided for. Fortunately, more and more toys and products specifically designed as "foraging" items are now available. Parrots engage with them with the goal of procuring hidden food treats. We can now provide these items as an alternative to natural browse. If your parrot lacks interest in the toys and artificial enrichment on offer, it's time for a change. The WPT Store is now stocking some cool toys for pet parrots that are worth a look!

## Home Sweet Home!

An enclosure that facilitates "normal" behaviours needs to accompany a dynamic and creative approach to food management. In my experience, most pet parrots are maintained in enclosures far too small, and for too long, to maintain optimum behavioural health. Larger enclosures obviously facilitate the provision of a wider range of materials, substrates, perching and food positioning options. If small enclosures are used it may be beneficial to develop a regular routine of varying furnishings. Care should be taken with sensitive individuals with a history of aversive reactions to changes. For such individuals allow for gradual

desensitisation to enrichment items, and even new perches in extreme cases.

Bear in mind that parrot owners can "over provide" enrichment items and inadvertently create a cluttered environment that reduces healthy movement within the enclosure. Providing excessive amounts of artificial enrichment may also result in a lack of interest in such items. A rotation schedule, with a minimum number of artificial enrichment items being provided for no more than a week at a time, may be far more beneficial than a "saturation" approach. This is often particularly relevant for young parrots. When

we consider enclosure suitability we also may need to consider the position of the enclosure. Incompatibility stress with other animals in the environment might be a potential contributor to feather problems. This possibility prompts the need for careful observation of any parrot that is housed with or around other birds and animals and is damaging its own feathers with appropriate modifications made if necessary. The ideal, in my opinion, is to provide companion parrots with access to an outdoor aviary. This facilitates enhanced provision of natural browse and exposes the bird to a huge variety of natural stimuli, particularly visual and aural stimuli, that is rarely achieved indoors.

Whilst many of us may not be able to provide natural foraging browse, you can certainly create an artificial environment that offers plenty of stimulation!



Photo: © Athene Alpar

## Bathing Schedules

Skin and feather health may be dependent to varying degrees on humidity and access to bathing opportunities. Owners of companion parrots kept indoors, particularly in air-conditioned environments, may need to reassess the bathing schedule of their bird if behavioural feather picking is diagnosed. I have consulted with a number of feather picking birds that were rarely, if ever, bathed or provided with opportunities to self-bathe. This is very important for keepers of neo-tropical species whose natural range is within areas of high annual rainfall. Proper access to bathing promotes natural preening behaviours and can often be a significant component of successful recovery. In the case of Peaches and Vincent, the bathing schedule you have described should be more than adequate.

## A Social Life

It's great to see that we have an environment here with two African Greys and not just one. Companion parrots are often deprived of natural physical interactions with conspecifics (same species). When we consider that mutual preening is an integral part of natural pair bond behaviour for a range of species commonly kept as pets, the lack of access to such interactions can be considered contributory to some cases of excessive preening leading to feather damage. Aside from the physical aspect, balancing social interaction for pet parrots encompasses the behavioural and cognitive side as well. Most parrot species (the Kakapo is one exception) are highly social and often form strong pair bonds. It is extremely unnatural for most parrots to be alone for most of the day, as many pet parrots often are. I firmly believe that many parrots fail to cope with the inconsistencies of the human-parrot bond and as a result we often see behavioural abnormalities arise. Obviously there are exceptions, but there is little arguing that captive parrots that are kept alone and without regular human interactions will benefit from the stimulation of another parrot, preferably of the same species, in their environment. A whole suite of behaviours can be observed between parrots, even in different enclosures, housed in the same environment that would otherwise be absent in a solitary individual. Such stimulation can equate to increased activity and engagement in enrichment items and less time spent



Photo: ©Jim McKendry

Social compatibility is important in reducing the potential for feather picking. Only one of these Blue & Gold Macaws is a feather picker - Can you identify which one?

damaging feathers. The key to this strategy is achieving compatibility and minimising incompatibility stress.

Jo, you have covered this consideration as well as any companion parrot owner can by having two African Greys in the environment. We're still short of the ideal for avoiding feather picking by not having a truly compatible partnership, but Vincent is still very young. Over time, hopefully the level and quality of interactions between Peaches and Vincent will improve and provide both of them with a stronger diversion from picking in your absence.

Finally, considering your question about whether Vincent flying to you and not staying with other family members or visitors for long durations is "age related behaviour". Whilst a young parrot at 11 months of age will certainly still tend to gravitate towards whomever it has a well-established parental association with, it's perhaps best to consider this behaviour purely from a reinforcement schedule perspective. It's likely that the behaviour of flying back to you is reinforced with more consistency, and better contiguity, than the reinforcement on offer from

others wanting to handle him. It's also likely that the interactions Vincent has with you are more positively reinforcing in general and that he has established a stronger association with you as someone who is predictable, and offers rewards on a more consistent schedule than others. Try making your goals more achievable for Vincent by setting up a reinforcement schedule from other people that is more consistent and less variable than is perhaps presently being delivered.

Jo, managing feather picking is an on-going process of reflection, careful evaluation of the functional interaction and relationship between the behaviour and the environment, and a dedicated approach to creating alternatives to feather chewing. If the problem persists then I would recommend seeking out some professional advice and support on-site from a consultant or veterinarian who may be able to work with you on some strategies specific to your environment.

Kind Regards from 'Down Under',  
Jim McKendry

