



Feather Destructive Behavior

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Definition

Feather Destructive Behavior (FDB) describes a syndrome in which some or all of the bird's body feathers are pulled out, amputated, frayed or in some other way damaged by the bird itself. It may also include mutilation (chewing and/or biting) of the skin. Initially, the bird often focuses on the breast feathers and may move to the legs, wings and tail feather, sparing the head feathers. Eventually, FDB may prevent normal feather regrowth and emergence.

Psychology

Parrots rarely indulge in feather destructive behavior for just one reason. In most cases, FDB is caused by a complex combination of physical and behavioral causes. In addition, bird behavior, both good and bad, tends to be patterned and ritualized. This also applies to FDB. In many cases, FDB represents one extreme of the feather care and maintenance continuum. Because most captive parrots do not have to spend time seeking food, nesting sites and other tasks, they often spend extra time with feather care. In some situations, this can lead to damage to feathers or skin. Interestingly, FDB is only seen in captive birds. Wild birds do not pick because they too preoccupied with their own survival and reproduction. In humans as well as animals, chronic self-mutilation causes the release of euphoric, pain killing and habit-forming chemicals (endorphins) in the brain. In certain predisposed individuals, this may lead to an addiction to the destructive behavior.

Species Predisposed

Common: cockatoos, African greys (esp. wild caught, Timnehs), Eclectus
Frequent: macaws, conures, grey-cheeked parakeets, cockatiels, lovebirds, Quakers
Rare: Amazon parrots

Causes

Medical

1. Organ dysfunction (examples: liver or kidney disease)
2. Infectious diseases (bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites). Interestingly, mites are rare!
3. Malnutrition (esp. vitamin A deficiency)
4. Toxin (nicotine, zinc, lead, aflatoxin)
5. Trauma (bad wings trims, damaged pin feathers, arthritis from old injury)
6. Allergies (example: peanuts, safflower)
7. Rule-out molting problems (hypothyroidism, ovarian tumor)

Environmental

1. Dry skin/low environmental humidity
2. Airborne and water pollutants
3. Poor lighting, lack of UV light
4. Lack of sleep
5. Environment changes – weather, cage location, owner schedule...
6. Aggression/overgrooming from other birds

Behavioral

1. Sexual frustration (hormone surges)
2. Lack of proper training
3. Learned behavior (watching another bird with FDB)
4. Attention-seeking, manipulative
5. Boredom, lack of stimulation
6. Anxiety, environmental or other stressors
7. stressors

Diagnosis

To obtain the correct diagnosis, a physical examination of the bird and the bird's environment is essential. A complete history, including diet, reproductive and previous medical problems is important. In most cases, a laboratory work-up is done to evaluate the bird's internal systems (blood testing, x-rays, etc.)

Treatment

Unfortunately, most bird owners want quick resolution to the FDB. This is often NOT possible. Most cases of FDB require extensive effort, substantial expense and time for improvement or cure. In some situations, a cure is not possible. This is especially true when birds are presented with chronic FDB. The most successful treatment plan involves a multidisciplinary approach:

1. Treat any medical problems identified
2. Optimize nutrition
 - ›Ensure diet 70-75% pellets
 - ›Emphasize deeply pigmented vegetables and fruits high in vitamin A
 - ›Use organic sunflower seeds to reduce exposure to pesticides
 - ›Avoid peanuts in shell to reduce exposure to mold toxins
 - ›Use bottled or purified water to reduce exposure to chlorine/other impurities
 - ›Increase or decrease fat content of diet in species and individuals that need it
3. Optimize environment

Select a variety of toys and rotate for interest. The goal is to displace destructive behavior away from feathers. Toys that duplicate the sensation of feather picking are especially helpful. Also toys that can be destroyed and toys that stimulate the bird's mind are excellent.

Physical exercise serves as an emotional outlet and can include flying

for flighted birds and walking for birds that have clipped wings. Climbing is an excellent activity for all birds. Providing labor-intensive foods by foraging is also excellent.

Additional Recommendations:

- ›Make sure cage size and placement is appropriate
 - ›Make sure separate play area available to bird
 - ›Ensure frequent baths, consider a humidifier if environment is dry
 - ›Strategically implement entertainment/distraction devices, such as a radio, television or bird video. Consider a timer to avoid static noise
 - ›Ensure adequate rest (10-12 hours uninterrupted sleep and nap time during day)
 - ›Full Spectrum lighting
 - ›No smoking policy and use of air purifier
4. Behavioral modification

The most common reason feather picking continues is believed to be due to positive reinforcement by the owner. This may be unintentional and even negative stimuli (scolding) may be interpreted as a reward by the bird.

