

## Feather-plucking parrots: what every veterinarian should know

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**Feather loss, plucking, picking and destructive behaviour are often synonymised and described as being complicated, multifactorial, frustrating and having a confusing clinical presentation (Mancinelli, 2015).**



**Figure 1.** Under wing pyoderma in an African grey parrot.

Skin disorders that might cause a feather loss include under wing pyoderma in African grey parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*; **Figure 1**) and lovebirds of the *Agapornis* genus or viral infections, such as psittacine beak and feather disease (which can affect just about all parrots) and polyomavirus (which is quite common in smaller parrots such as cockatiels and Australian grass parakeets). These can easily be distinguished from feather plucking, even with a little clinical experience.

As an example, the feather-plucking bird depicted with under wing pyoderma had been plucking its feathers for nearly 20 years before it developed the pyoderma. The feather-plucking behaviour was thus not at all due to the pyoderma and this should be recognised and distinguished from feather-plucking as a behavioural problem. These skin conditions have a medical undertone and should be treated as such.

As a rule, individuals of the smaller parrot species do not pluck their feathers unless an underlying

medical problem is present. However, the medical and surgical treatment of avian skin problems is not the purpose of this article – it will focus on the feather-plucking African grey parrot as presented in the consulting room, as an example.

## Presentation

The typical feather-plucking parrot is, most commonly, a young African grey parrot that has overnight, or during the past week or so, started over-preening. The flag of the contour feathers, usually on the chest and upper wings, are damaged in a characteristic V-shaped way (**Figure 2**).

Another few days or weeks down the line, the V-shaped flag of the contour feathers are removed and only the downy part of the contour feathers are left, giving the parrot a fluffy appearance (**Figure 3**).

The individual that has been feather plucking for some time is often presented with a completely bare chest and back. At this stage, the possibility exists of a secondary skin infection – especially if these heavy pluckers start chewing and damaging the larger wing and tail feathers as well.

Appropriate medical treatment to curb dermatitis or the fitting of collars to prevent further damage to especially infected skin may be necessary. These treatments are offered to treat the result of feather plucking and not the cause of feather plucking.

The usual history of the feather-plucking African grey parrot is it has been in the owners' possession for a few months (or even a few years), has been hand-reared, is on a good diet and, generally, the owners are proud of and happy with the bird.

The onset of feather plucking often, but by no means always, coincides with some event such as the owners going on holiday and leaving the parrot with family and friends. Other common scenarios are changes in the household, such as children moving out or the owner shockingly going blonde overnight.

Of the 46 feather-plucking African grey parrots seen in practice during 2012 to 2015, 19 (41.3 per cent) started acutely, with the owner being able to recall a specific incident that might have been related to the starting of the feather-plucking behaviour.

The owners of 11 (23.9 per cent) of the birds could not recall or recognise any specific incidents that could have been linked to the onset of feather plucking. The remaining 16 (34.8 per cent) of the birds presented were long-term feather pluckers or owned second-hand or third-hand – all because they were feather pluckers in the first place.

In a survey by Jayson et al (2014), it was established 43.4 per cent of cockatoos (*Cacatua* species) and 39.4 per cent of African grey parrots were affected by feather plucking. This author pooled all

cockatoo species to arrive at these statistics, but, in reality, it is mainly the umbrella cockatoo (*Cacatua alba*) and Moluccan cockatoo (*C moluccensis*) that pluck their feathers. Sulphur-crested cockatoos (*C sulphurea* and *C galerita*) and Leadbeater's cockatoo (*C leadbeateri*) are seldom feather pluckers.

## Behavioural traits

It must be recognised all of these cockatoos are different species, each with specific behavioural traits and social structures, which is the key to feather plucking behaviour.

Why, then, would the African grey parrot (the main focus of this article) be so well presented as a feather plucker? Furthermore, why do these individuals start plucking feathers often after specific incidents and why do some African grey parrots never pluck their feathers, no matter what?

Earle and Prowse (2000) summarised and discussed some information on the natural behaviour in the wild of a few of the larger parrot species in an attempt to give vets having to deal with feather-plucking parrots some understanding of the condition and its causes from a behavioural and ecological perspective. This information is vital for vets.

Two aspects of natural behaviour of the larger parrots in general should be considered when dealing with the feather-plucking parrot – the bird's intelligence (including the individual bird's personality) and the social structure of the bird communities in nature, coupled with the complexity of the natural habitat of the specific bird species.

Only the larger parrot species – and individuals within that species that are intelligent, have a specific social structure in nature and inhabit complex habitats (usually forest or complex savannah) – pluck their feathers.

It is well known African grey parrots are intelligent birds. Their intelligence is on a par with a five-year-old human, while their emotional development is close to that of a two-year-old to three-year-old child (Davis, 1991).

With this level of intelligence, it is easy to grasp each individual will have a different personality.

Just like humans, some individuals with specific types of personality will be able to cope with some situations and others will not. This is the key to why some birds will pluck their feathers and others in the same situation or conditions will not.

The second factor to consider is the complexity of the social structure of the parrot species in their natural habitat. Feather plucking in the larger parrots is, with few exceptions, a result of their social behavioural traits.

Parrots, even the hand-reared and thus very tame and entertaining individuals, are wild animals and not domesticated. They show behavioural traits as they would in the wild, adapting their behaviour to the conditions they find themselves in – in a household, for instance.

## Habitat

In their natural habitat, African grey parrots are social animals that show remarkable similarities to human social behaviour. These birds roost communally at night in flocks of up to 10,000 in the primary and secondary lowland forests of Central and West Africa.



**Figure 2.** Characteristic V-shaped damage on an African grey parrot's contour feathers from plucking.

However, in the mornings, these birds leave the roost in smaller “family” groups of 2 to 12 (in Gabon) and 6 to 10 (in Guinea-Bissau) to feed in the surrounding forests (Fry et al, 1988).

de Naurois (1981) studied Timneh grey parrots on Príncipe Island and found the family groups to be slightly larger, at 3 to 30 birds, but also found a definite hierarchy structure within these groups. The hierarchy structure, usually linear, is important to maintain stability in the family group.

The life of the individual African grey parrot thus revolves around this smaller family group as these (not necessarily related) birds stay together during the day, foraging, resting and preening within sight or at least sound distance from each other.

Although individuals in this family group of birds will pair off during the breeding season, it was established members of such a family group will all nest in close proximity to each other (Fry et al, 1988). It was also established individual African grey parrots can recognise up to 15 other individual African grey parrots (personal observation) and it is well known an African grey parrot in

a household is able to recognise all individuals in a human household, as well as occasional visitors, the postman and even strangers.

To relate this back to the hand-reared, tame and entertaining African grey parrot in the human household, when the parrot is brought into a household consisting of a few humans and some other pets, the parrot (to put it in anthropomorphic terms) thinks everybody in the household is just another parrot in its family group.

In the parrot's mind, a hierarchy system will be established in the household, with the main parrot at the top and everyone in the household being placed somewhere in the ranking order. As long as this system is working well, most parrots in the household will be happy to get on with life. However, some individuals, due to their personality traits, will not be able to cope with change.

For instance, the owner (and the rest of the parrot's family) going on holiday and being left with a family friend can be devastating for some individuals and not being able to cope will often result in over-preening and feather plucking.

Preening feathers is a normal and necessary activity of parrots. The aim of it is to keep the body surface smooth and sleek to fly effectively to search for food and to out-fly predators. It was noticed African grey parrots will spend less than 60 seconds every hour preening their feathers in nature before having to fly off with the family or being disturbed by other birds (personal observation). Thus, in nature, African grey parrots simply do not have time to over-preen, damage feathers and eventually pluck them.

Since the owners of the parrots care well for their pets, supplying them with food in abundance and shielding them from any predators or other dangers they might encounter in nature, the individual parrot has a lot of time to sit and preen its feathers.

If this is coupled with a confusing situation of not knowing where the rest of the family has gone (being on holiday) and being in an unknown area (the friends' house), African grey parrots with a specific type of personality will over-preen as a comforting behaviour.

Because of over-preening, some feathers will be damaged and, as a natural behaviour, damaged feathers have to be removed in an effort to make the body sleek to be able to fly properly. In this attempt to streamline the body, even more feathers are damaged, more are removed and, within a few days, a fully feathered African grey parrot can become a fluff ball.

## **Owner understanding**

Owners presenting an acute feather-plucked African grey parrot are usually confused about the situation – especially after consulting the internet. The defence of “he is definitely not bored as he never spends time in his cage and has lots of toys” is usually the opening sentence. The next

sentence usually goes: “He eats a better and more varied diet than us.”

If the vet can assure the owner the feather-plucking behaviour is not the result of the amount of toys or diet, a meaningful discussion around the personality of the parrot will go a long way to satisfying the owner. In any case, the intelligent parrot does not want to play by itself with toys, but interact with the rest of its family – that is, the owner and other members of the household.

Being part of the parrot’s family group means (in the parrot’s mind) you will always be in contact with the rest of your group, so nobody can go out to work, shopping or on holiday and leave the parrot at home or with friends.

## Therapy



**Figure 3.** Prolonged feather plucking leaves the downy part of the contour feathers remaining, which gives the parrot a fluffy appearance.

If the vet and parrot owner understand the reasons for feather plucking, it may be possible to attempt to do something about the behaviour. What can be done, then? The solution, in words, is easy, although whether it can be achieved is a different matter. This, again, is down to the personality of the individual bird.

The solution is to keep the intelligent African grey parrot busy every hour of the day – not just an hour or so when the working owner comes home. The bird should be working for food by it being hidden in rolled up newspaper or boxes it has to destroy to get to the food. Favourite food should be suspended from the top of the cage or stand so the bird will have to work to get hold of it.

Every moment the parrot spends working for food, or being busy in any other way, is time it does not spend plucking its feathers. To keep the parrot busy is usually hard work, but it is the only way to attempt to break the cycle of feather plucking. Here, one has to play to the strength of the individual parrot and only the owner will be able to know what this is.

If the parrot likes to destroy wood then offcuts from a DIY store are needed to keep it busy. If it is toilet roll tubes that will keep the parrot busy then friends and family will have to help and recycle these items to the parrot's owner.

Treatments and solutions that will not work include:

- Getting another bird – the new bird will have to be slotted into the hierarchy system, as the existing bird sees it, and this will often complicate the problem.
- Giving the bird more or new toys – most birds do not like new things in their cage and, in any case, the bird would rather communicate with the owner.
- Fitting a collar to keep the parrot's beak away from its body – this is probably a bit cruel and the parrot will continue plucking as soon as the collar is removed.
- Drugs – the reason for the behaviour is not a result of a depressed bird and dulling the bird's senses is not appropriate treatment in this case.

Stressed and wild caught parrots do not feather-pluck, while contented birds do. It is a contradiction of terms that owners who look after their parrots well, physically and mentally, are rewarded by the parrot plucking its feathers. The feather-plucking parrot that sits on its cage in the consulting room and preens its feathers while he should be somewhat stressed by being in a strange environment has a poor prognosis of resolving the feather plucking.

The vet should, in such cases, be bold enough to inform the owner he or she might have to accept a bird with less than perfect feathers, as it is unlikely the personality of the parrot can be changed. The owner should rather attempt to concentrate on developing and challenging the intelligence and personality of the bird.

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