

Evergreen Avian & Exotic Animal Hospital

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Feather Destructive Disorder – A Behavioral Dilemma

Feather Destructive Disorder (FDD) is often termed “feather picking” or “feather chewing”. It can start with an illness, hormone imbalance or reproductive system activity, dietary imbalance or husbandry problem. These are called “organic or medical” reasons for initiation of FDD. Your veterinarian will want to run tests and do an extensive workup on the bird to rule out any of these causes. The most difficult etiology to deal with is behavioral causes and continuation or escalation of FDD.

Once it has been determined that there is no organic disease problem as the root of the FDD, then aspects of behavior will be examined. This includes behavioral modifications and environmental enrichment or enhancements. A bird who has just started FDD is a better candidate for improvement than one that has been plucking for years. In all cases treatment is to prevent worsening of the condition. The bird may or may not ever completely resolve the problem or have complete normal plumage. It is not hopeless, but because there may be many factors involved, it is difficult to manage.

The first step is to be sure the diet is optimum and the home environment is stable and that the bird feels secure. This often means that there are no changes to the family dynamic. The caging may need improvement – size, perching, foraging, toys, or even placement of the caging within the home. The bird must feel free from predators (dog/cat access to the bird) although many birds accept other pets in the home and most do not seem stressed by their presence. Can the bird see outside or receive natural daylight? Is the bird covered at night?

Is the bird afraid of items or people within the home? Does the bird vocalize excessively (may indicate stress, disruption of flock (family) dynamic, fear)? Is the bird very attached to one person to the exclusion of others (may even be aggressive to other people)? All of these stresses may contribute to FDD and need to be examined and corrected.

We ask that people keep a log and try to determine if there are sequences of behaviors or activities which seem to trigger a picking episode. It may be that the most picking can be seen at a certain hour of the day, or following an action such as handling and then being replaced into the cage. As Dr. Brian Speer writes: Try to identify triggering events or sequences of events that have a role in the manifestation of FDD. A bird that only damages its feathers when you are present, when you are absent, or when other environmental changes occur is giving us clues that should be investigated. If there are identifiable triggers, then the real work can start: Why do these events cause such a displacement stress behavior? What can be done to teach the bird to accept some of these things? Should this bird learn to accept all of those triggering environmental events?

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For any bird with FDD, basic training actions such as “step up”, coming when called, etc. should be strengthened with increased time doing just those actions. If the bird does not know these commands and is not comfortable with being worked with, then it is more difficult to work with behavior. So the first steps may be spending time with the bird daily on basic training or strengthening basic training. This helps to also establish a routine which aids in creating a stable environment. Remember that most birds have the mental capacity of a child between the ages of 2 and 5: stability of environment and routines are very important to decrease stress.

It is important with birds with FDD to be encouraged to do normal feather care. Many of these birds are not preening effectively. Misting or showering the bird often may help. Providing toys that function as surrogate grooming bodies (like tassels, toys with strings for chewing) may help as well.

It may be that the bird is not receiving enough social interactions either with its human family or with other birds (of the same species). Try again for regular play, training sessions on a daily basis, as well as contact time (be in same room, talk to, handle). You do not want to do behaviors that approximate sexual behaviors such as inappropriate touching of the bird’s neck, shoulders, back and vent area. Such activities may reinforce a reproductive pair bonding which is not conducive to a stable behavioral situation. You do want the bird to be on good terms with all family members as this will help to stabilize the “flock”, and decrease dependence on one person. It may also help to dispel aggressiveness to a particular person. It can be challenging to train the bird to be “ok” with a member that the bird may be aggressive towards, but it can be done.

One of the most successful activities to decrease FDD is to increase foraging behaviors. In the wild, most birds spend most of their time foraging for food and only a small time preening. In captivity and in birds with FDD, this time allotment is reversed. To increase foraging, try putting foods in toys, puzzles, and the bottom of the cage rather than in food dishes. The bird then has to “work” for its food and uses a lot of time doing so. Fresh water should be available always.

The bottom line is that working with a bird with FDD is a challenge, but it can be done to minimize FDD. The bird’s life should be in balance with social interaction, foraging, and preening (feather care).

Specifics of breaking the reproductive pair bonding situation, basic training, and social interaction training, and foraging will be covered in additional information sheets.