Grooming Your Bird
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Section: Bird Grooming

When it comes to grooming, birds are fussier than a lot of people. A bird likes a regular bath, an occasional manicure, and – if there’s no avian love interest around to provide it – a bit of a haircut from you.

An important rule of thumb: healthy birds groom themselves. A parrot who has been happily preening away and suddenly stops fussing with her feathers or changes her preening routine may be ill and need veterinary attention.

A healthy bird will care for her feathers, beak and feet pretty much on her own. Birds learn how to groom their feathers early in life. In her daily preening ritual – her version of a comb-out – she’ll preen her feathers, or those of a mate, every day, often just before bedtime.

Your bird may have an oil-secreting gland at the base of her tail, from which she takes oils with her beak to spread over her feathers. Some birds, including cockatoos, may have a powder or dust on their feathers, instead. It keeps the feathers in good shape, but some humans are allergic to this dust, so check to see if it bothers you before taking the bird home.

Birds Shed, Too

Like dogs and cats, birds shed. They lose their feathers in a molt, which is a process that they usually undergo once a year in the wild. In captivity, a bird usually sheds more gradually, in reaction to artificial light and temperature controls.

When your bird’s old feather falls out, a new feather – called a “pin” or “blood” feather – grows in the same follicle. It’s covered by a keratin sheath or quill that your bird will pick off as his new feather grows. But if he can’t reach the sheaths at the top of his head or behind his neck, and he’s short a girlfriend, you get the job.

Use your thumb and index finger as a beak and gently break the sheath and pull it away from the new feather. But be careful or you’ll have a very unhappy customer on your hands. Since the new feathers have a blood supply and nerve endings, you can cause a lot of pain if you pinch too hard on a pin feather before the sheath is ready to come off.

Stress Bars in Birds

A line that appears on a new feather that’s growing in, where the normal color is disturbed, is called a stress-bar and it’s often a first sign of illness. Regularly examine the feathers for those lines, and if you find them, call your avian veterinarian.

A black edge on some of a bird’s feathers isn’t uncommon in bright green birds, like the Amazon. The blackness also could come from oils or lotions on your hands when you pet your bird. Start washing your hands before you pet your bird and watch for new feathers to make sure the black disappears.

When Birds Groom Too Much

Just as humans can become fixated on one behavior, birds sometimes grow overzealous in their grooming.
A bird that shreds its feathers or plucks them to the point of baldness or self-mutilation may have any one of a number of problems: skin diseases, internal illnesses or mental distress. You should seek your veterinarian’s help before the destructive behavior gets to be a habit.

Avian experts often have trouble pinpointing the cause of over-preening. But it seems the most intelligent parrots – the African Grey, the cockatoo and the Quaker – are the most susceptible.

In the wild, they often frolic in the rain or in a puddle, and in your home, they’ll want a bath or shower several times a week. A gentle spritz of water from a spray bottle or a soak in the shower cleans off excessive dust and softens the quills during molting so that they come off more easily. It also encourages the bird to preen. Some birds may prefer a bath in a shallow dish or pan.

If the room is warm while the bird is wet, you can skip the blow-dry. As for beauty treatments, a lot of commercial products are marketed with the promise that a spritz will create gorgeous feathers, but there’s no proof they work better than water.

**Keeping the Beak in Shape**

Your bird’s beak grows continuously, like a fingernail or hoof, but a healthy bird should never need to have its beak trimmed. It’s normal for your parrot to have a bit of a layered look to its beak and for the bird to rub and smooth it on the side of its perch or cage. Concrete perches are ideal for this purpose. The bird will make a grinding noise as she rubs her upper and lower beak together, usually in a nightly ritual.

If your bird’s beak-pruning habits change, and the beak grows long and brittle, it could be a sign of illness, particularly liver disease, so see your veterinarian. A bird needs to have its beak trimmed when the upper and lower portion don’t line up properly, interfering with eating. A misaligned beak is also more prone to cracking or breaking, a painful and dangerous event because a severe hemorrhage could occur. So a cracked beak should be treated quickly.

**Trimming the Toenails**

Anyone who’s jabbed his arm on a parrot’s long toenail has learned the hard way that those nails need periodic trimming. A veterinarian can do the job, and should always trim the nails of large birds. But, if the bird has white toenails that let you see the quick, you may be able to clip them yourself. Be extremely cautious though, because if you hit the quick – where the blood vessels and nerves go into the nail – the bird could bleed profusely. Always keep a styptic pencil handy.

A concrete perch is better for your bird than sandpaper, which isn’t stable enough and can be pecked at and swallowed by your pet. Concrete doesn’t just keep a bird’s beak in shape; it’s also good for the feet, because it helps form calluses that act as protection, and keeps her sharp nails rounded. Make sure the concrete perch is the highest one in the cage, and your bird will use it.