

“Is My Bird Sick?” Series
Part 2-The Avian Beak and Nails
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By Dr. Tarah Hadley, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian)
Atlanta Hospital for Birds and Exotics, Inc.

Why is the beak overgrown? Can my bird eat this way? Why are my bird's nails overgrown? Will they always be this way? Does this mean that something is wrong with my bird? How can I keep them from getting so sharp? These are just a few of the questions you may have about two of the most noticeable parts of your bird's anatomy.

There is no denying the importance of the avian beak. Your bird uses it to eat, drink, balance, grasp, and sometimes bite. The beak has a shell of hard keratin and bone lies underneath the keratin. It has a blood supply and a complex nerve supply, making it a very sensitive sensory organ. Your bird's beak grows along predetermined planes and normally takes about six months to fully regenerate!

As the beak grows, it may be normal to see some grooves and flaking. Sometimes the beak may have a dry appearance. In cockatoos and other birds that produce feather dander, the beak should normally have a light coating of white powder. The shape and color of the beak varies among individuals and different species of birds. Knowledge of what the beak should look like can help an owner determine whether there is a potential abnormality that requires further evaluation.

Beak abnormalities occur due to a number of causes, including trauma and nutritional imbalances. An overgrown beak may result from inadequate wearing. Birds with underlying liver disease secondary to high fat diets are thought to be prone to developing overgrown beaks. The beak tip on many of these birds is thin and sharp to a point and the tip may abnormally extend well below the base of the lower beak. In young birds, beak abnormalities may be present at birth.

These birds should be examined by a veterinarian. Recommendations for treatment may include a beak trim, changes in nutrition, or physical therapy.

Some of the same causes of an overgrown beak may also cause overgrown nails. While overgrown nails are usually noted for causing trauma to the owner's arms, a bird's nails are essential to maintaining balance during perching. Birds spend 100% of their time on their feet. Hence, poor foot health may inevitably lead to poor health overall. A proper physical examination of your bird should not only include an evaluation of the nails but also the rest of the foot. Common foot abnormalities include skin that is worn, rough, or discolored. An experienced veterinarian can assess whether your bird perches properly, which is one window into the health of your bird's feet. In addition to a nail trim, your veterinarian may suggest changes in nutrition or changes in the number, type, or diameter of perches available in your bird's environment.