

“Is My Bird Sick?” Series
Part 3-Avian Feathers and Skin
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Feathers are one of the most brilliant and eye-catching parts of a pet bird. The varying shades of green, yellow, red, and purple are often breath-taking and are usually the first things we notice when we see a bird. Feathers can also be one of the most frustrating aspects of a bird for pet owners, particularly when the bird becomes fixated on pulling them out.

Feathers come in different shapes and sizes, depending on their location and function. Some familiarity with the types and colors of feathers that a particular bird species should have in a particular location will go a long way towards helping pet owners decide when they've got a problem. As part of their basic research, owners may want to familiarize themselves with how a particular bird species should look prior to acquiring that type of bird as a pet. This will help alert owners to possible problems before a bird becomes a pet.

Here are some questions you may want to ask: How old is the bird? Will the color and amount of feathers change as the bird ages? Are feathers missing on certain parts of the body and why? When was the last time this bird molted? Are the feathers dull and why? What is this bird's diet? Why are the feathers dull, broken, shredded, or unkempt? Does this bird pluck its feathers and how long has it been doing this? How often does this bird bathe?

An assessment of the feathers is just one part of an evaluation. The skin underneath is just as important to the health and well-being of the bird. Bird skin is extremely thin compared to the skin of other animals and may be more prone to tearing when traumatized. The skin may also be sensitive to foreign chemicals. For this reason, it is important to beware of exhaust fumes (such as from candles, cigarettes, cooking oils) that may be deposited on a bird's feathers and skin. Bird owners should also seek the advice of an experienced veterinary professional prior to the application of any sprays, ointments, or creams. Just

because a spray product sold in a pet store is labeled “for bird feathers or skin” does not necessarily mean that it is safe to use on your bird.

If you suspect or know your bird is having a problem with its feathers or skin, seek advice from an experienced veterinarian as soon as possible. The longer it takes to have your bird evaluated the more difficult it becomes to try to pinpoint the source of your bird’s problems. In my experience, a thorough history on a bird that is picking out its feathers or self mutilating is just as important as the physical examination or any diagnostic tests that are performed. A thorough history usually includes extensive information on a bird’s environment and diet. Please realize that a single veterinary visit may not be enough to identify the source of the problem; multiple discussions between an owner and their veterinarian may be needed. Likewise, one treatment protocol may not be enough to resolve the problem. Therefore, patience and communication between an owner and their veterinarian are essential ingredients toward a healthy outcome for a pet bird.