



Feather Destructive Behaviour in Birds

Feather destructive behaviour in birds may be a symptom of many different diseases and has no one single cause. Unfortunately, it is also a very common condition encountered in a huge range of species at The Unusual Pet Vets.



What is feather destructive behaviour?

Feather destructive behaviour is a term used to describe a range of behaviours where birds damage their own feathers. Common forms of this include 'barbering' (removing or damaging individual barbs on their feathers) or feather plucking, where a feather is completely pulled out by the bird.

What causes it?

There are a huge variety of causes for this syndrome, which are commonly divided into *medical* and *behavioural*.

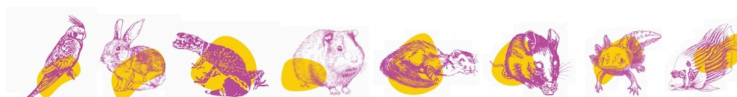
Commonly Diagnosed Medical Causes Include:

Liver disease

This can be primary liver disease or secondary to a poor diet or diseases such as avian chlamydia. As the liver is responsible for producing proteins (and the feathers are largely protein-based), any deficiency of the liver can lead to poor feather quality.

Viral feather diseases

- *Polyomavirus* – this disease is most commonly seen in very young birds in large breeding environments. The birds that survive the initial stages of the viral disease often develop life-long feather disease.
- *Beak and Feather Disease* – as the name suggests, this disease is associated with abnormal feather and beak growth. This virus produces a disease similar to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) in birds and requires life-long management.





Skin disease

As birds do not have hands, they will often use their beak to pick at areas of pain or infection. In cases of dermatitis (usually secondary to trauma or environmental toxins such as nicotine), birds can make the underlying issue worse by picking at the area of irritation.

Behavioural Causes Include:

Underlying inflammation or infection

It is a common behaviour of birds to use their beak to pick at areas of pain or inflammation. In some cases, internal parasites or injuries to bone such as arthritis or old fractures can cause chronic plucking of the overlying skin and feathers.

- *Hypersexuality* – this is a common syndrome in pet birds. Predisposing factors of this are high fat diets, abnormally long day length (we recommend aiming for consistent day length throughout the year) or developing sexual pair bonds with their owners.

In the case where all medical causes have been ruled out, The Unusual Pet Vets will work closely with you and a number of external behavioural companies to investigate and manage behavioural-based feather picking.

My bird has been plucking her feathers. What do I do now?

As feather plucking has a large spectrum of causes, it is important to get your bird investigated for some of the more sinister causes of this issue. At the Unusual Pet Vets, we will take a detailed history of your bird and its environment, and then depending on the case, we will often take a blood sample to rule out underlying conditions and viral diseases. If these tests come back as normal, the next step is often to rule out other potential underlying causes with x-rays or a CT scan.



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