Do You Have An “Itchy” Bird?

An avian veterinarian discusses the reasons for this condition.

By JeAnne Smith, D.V.M.

In my practice, I see many “itchy” birds — a condition veterinarians call pruritis. Some of these birds are feather pluckers or chewers, and some are self-mutilators. What distinguishes them as itchy birds is the way they act. When a bird plucks its feathers casually and calmly during preening or when trying to get an owner’s attention (even if the attention is nothing more than the owner screaming, “Stop that!”), it probably is not an itchy bird. When the bird furiously digs at itself, either periodically or continually, acts agitated or irritated as it plucks, or vigorously rubs its head or sides against perches or cage wire, it probably is an itchy bird.

I would like to make a distinction between the nonspecific, random self-mutilation that occurs in most mutilating pruritic birds and the self-mutilation I commonly see in Moluccan cockatoos. I often see Moluccans pick holes in their skin over the keel of their breast bone. I have not yet found an organic cause or seen evidence of pruritis in any of these birds. I do not know why this species is prone to do this, nor what the inciting cause is. I do know that it is a self-perpetuating syndrome. As the initial injury scabs and scars, the bird is attracted to it and picks at it more. A vicious circle begins. Some of these cases clear up when the fibrous scar tissue is surgically removed, and the skin margins heal well with no blemishes to attract the bird’s attention. In some cases, however, the vicious circle just starts over again with a new wound. As far as I can tell from the cases I’ve seen, this does not appear to be a pruritis problem.

Symptoms Of Pruritis

Pruritic birds have some underlying organic cause for the itchiness and resulting feather or skin damage. In my experience, those causes are varied, and sometimes it takes some careful detective work on the part of the owner to determine the cause.

The first things to check for are obvious signs of dermatitis or folliculitis (inflammation of skin or feather follicles). Dry, flaky skin or thickened,
reddened skin may also indicate dermatitis. Swollen, reddened feather follicles (the area where the feather shaft comes out of the skin) may indicate folliculitis. Dry, flaky skin may be related to marginal malnutrition, and the bird's diet should be supplemented with multivitamins and minerals.

The bird should also be checked for external parasites. However, I rarely find mites (other than scaley mites) or lice on cage birds, and it is even rarer for me to find them on these pruritic birds.

A bird showing signs of pruritis should also be checked for lumps, injuries, feather cysts or other irritants in the area where the bird is doing the most damage. I have seen birds pluck feathers over their backs when the wings were trimmed improperly, and the cut shafts were poking their backs. I have seen them pluck over lipomas and other tumors. There have even been cases of birds with internal tumors or kidney disease plucking over the skin above the tumor or on top of the kidney.

Next, the bird should be checked for common parasite, yeast and bacterial infections. An intestinal, respiratory or crop infection can cause whole-body pruritis because of a hypersensitivity reaction. This is similar to a dog that is allergic to flea bites. The dog may only have a few fleas, so the fleas themselves aren't causing the intense itchiness and skin changes, but the bites of the few fleas are causing an allergic reaction to which the dog responds. From what I've seen in many cases in my practice, I believe that this occurs in birds, as well.

Some birds with Giardia, for example, show none of the intestinal signs or weight loss associated with giardiasis, and they may have relatively low numbers of the organisms, but they aggressively pluck themselves. After treatment for the Giardia, they no longer pluck. The same syndrome occurs with Staphylococcus aureus infections, yeast infections and roundworm infections. It probably also occurs with other organisms, but I have not yet had experience with seeing the pruritis clear up after diagnosis and treatment for other infections.

If a pruritic bird shows no evidence of any of the above causes, I recommend performing blood work on the bird. A complete blood count (CBC) should be done, but, if possible, it is better to do blood chemistries, as well. Sometimes these tests will uncover a variety of problems, such as liver disease, kidney disease or a previously undetected infection. Sometimes the CBC will show abnormal numbers of certain classes of white blood cells, but everything else will be normal.

Although the veterinary texts state that not much is known about the role these white blood cells play in birds, if I see elevations when everything else is normal, I look for allergies. These white blood cells are associated with allergies and hypersensitivities in mammals. I also look for allergies if all the bloodwork is normal.

Here is where the detective work comes in. It becomes very important for the owner to think back to when the problem started, and look for any changes in diet or environment that occurred within a few weeks before the onset of the itchiness. Allergens causing pruritis may be inhaled (cigarette smoke, cockatoo dander, perfumes, house deodorants, plant pollens or dust
mold), contacted (detergents used for clothing and cage covers, deodorants, perfumes, hair products, litter or nest box material), or ingested (especially certain proteins, carbohydrates or chemical additives, such as preservatives, colors or flavors).

Case Studies
The following cases offer some examples of how carefully you may need to search to find the cause of your bird's pruritis.

* I saw an African grey parrot that was severely pruritic over his back. We did a complete workup and found nothing. The owners remembered that they had changed cage covers the week he began plucking, using a sheet from the linen closet to cover his cage. When they removed the sheet from the cage, he returned to normal.

* A Goffin's cockatoo was brought in with "hiccuping" that occurred every evening after cuddling with the owner for an hour or two. The bird would start into a fit or series of what appeared to be involuntary jerking motions, described as hiccups. (As an aside, birds cannot technically hiccups. A hiccups is a muscle spasm of the diaphragm, which birds do not have.) After a thorough history and diagnostic workup, nothing was found. I received a phone call from the owner a week later saying that she had handled the bird one evening after showering and not putting on her deodorant, and the bird had not had the hiccups. She purposefully eliminated the deodorant for three or four days, and the bird remained normal. At this point, I found out that I was missing an important fact in my "thorugh" history — her cockatoo enjoyed snuggling his head into her armpit in the evenings.

* I examined an Amazon parrot with a history of aggravated feather plucking and ruled out any infectious causes. After questioning the owner, the only new thing we could determine was that the owner had begun giving the bird tidbits of bacon on a regular basis. When the owner discontinued feeding the bacon, the bird returned to normal.

* I have one lovebird patient that was badly self-mutilating. We had reached the stage of performing a CBC. The blood work was suggestive of a chronic granulomatous disease, such as aspergillosis or avian tuberculosis, but we had never found any clinical signs of either of these diseases. Cultures and fecal tests were repeatedly negative, but we started treating the lovebird for aspergillosis anyway. We chose not to start with tuberculosis treatments because those drugs are much more expensive. The lovebird immediately improved, and as long as it is on the antifungal medication, it does not mutilate. After six months, we tried to take the lovebird off the medication, and it was self-mutilating within two weeks. Once we put it back on the antifungal drug, the lovebird returned to normal.

Eating certain foods can trigger aggrivated feather plucking. If you add a food to your bird's diet, watch to see if there is a change in its preening habits.

Treatments
When an allergy or hypersensitivity is suspected because everything else has been ruled out, and if the cause cannot be isolated and eliminated, the bird can be treated symptomatically by giving it oral anti-inflammatory drugs, usually some sort of steroid. This is a "when all else fails" treatment that does not address the cause, but is designed to alleviate the symptoms. It should not be resorted to until everything else has been investigated or tried. Long-term steroid treatment has its adverse side effects. Those effects are well worth it, however, if that is what it finally takes to bring relief to a pruritic bird and its concerned owner.

A recently publicized treatment for nonpruritic, self-mutilating birds, such as in the case of the Moluccans mentioned earlier, is the use of antipsychotic therapy, such as haloperidol. This drug is remarkably effective in stopping this syndrome. I do not recommend the use of this drug until other organic causes, including allergies, are ruled out. And I do not recommend it for mutilating birds that act itchy.

Another specific self-mutilation syndrome I'd like to mention is the foot necrosis/self-mutilation syndrome seen in Amazon parrots. There is evidence that this is a pruritic problem caused by a herpesvirus infecting the skin on the feet of these birds. If an Amazon has typical signs of sores or discoloration on the feet and pruritis limited to the feet, a skin biopsy may diagnose the problem. Anti-inflammatory medications are used to treat these cases.

As you can see, pruritic birds can be a real challenge to diagnose and treat. It may take repeated testing, trial and error medicating, and trial and error elimination of food items or environmental exposures. There is still much to be learned about bird allergies and hypersensitivities. To date, veterinary texts still only mention that allergies might occur in birds. Currently, the only documented and acknowledged avian hypersensitivity syndrome is the chronic bronchitis and respiratory disease seen in macaws exposed to cockatoo powder. Given that allergies and hypersensitivities have been documented in large numbers of mammalian species, it is easily conceivable to me that birds would be likely to suffer from allergies. The more itchy birds I see and successfully treat, the more convinced I become.