

FEATHER PLUCKING

By Linda Greeson

The distressing habit of feather plucking is not limited to our Quakers, although they are more prone to strong bonding and separation anxiety than most other species. The chief problem, in my experience, is that Quakers also more quickly form habits - good or bad - and these habits are harder to change. In fact, they can be down right stubborn at times.

In most of the literature on the subject, boredom seems to be offered as the most common cause of feather plucking. It is true that our active, curious little Quakers are happiest when there is a lot going on in their lives. Confined to a cage for long periods of time without a frequent change of toys to keep them occupied, for reasons difficult to understand, they may decide that plucking out their feathers, one by one, is a fun way to pass the time. The disfiguring result and the persistence of the habit is completely dismaying for the fond pet owner. Some birds may limit their activity to creating a bald spot on the breast, but others extend to all feathers within their reach.

Before we rush down to the pet store to buy yet more toys and suffer feelings of guilt over our busy schedules that do not provide our pet with sufficient play time, we should consider the possibility of physical causes, rather than psychological. Certainly these should be eliminated before deciding that providing a companion bird is the answer. This solution very often ends only in additional problems even more difficult to handle. Jealousy is often suggested as another cause.

Most Avian Veterinarians suggest that psychological causes should be considered only if no physical cause can be determined. Investigation of the bird's history and a physical exam may be all that is required to make a diagnosis and to suggest treatment. In other cases, identifying the cause may require considerable use of the process of elimination.

If the onset of the habit is sudden, infection of the bird's gastro - intestinal tract with the parasite *Giardia* is often the cause. This is a

common condition in pet birds, diagnosed by examination of the droppings, and effectively treated with oral medication.

If the habit recurs at regular intervals it may coincide with reproductive cycles and may be an exaggeration of normal courtship preening behavior.

The problem may be caused by deficiencies in the diet, particularly Vitamin A. This vitamin is essential for healthy skin and feathers and is often lacking in a primarily seed diet. Excessive dietary fat may also be the culprit. The use of oil based vitamin products in the drinking water is another simply eliminated possible cause. The bird with oil stained feathers will industriously preen the area. When not successful in cleansing its feathers of the oil, it will start plucking out the offending feathers.

When not given the opportunity to bathe frequently and treated to light misting with warm water often, the dryness of our air conditioned homes has a bad effect on the Quaker's plumage. The feathers become brittle in texture, do not respond to preening efforts, and the bird's decision is to remove them.

When the more common causes of feather plucking have been eliminated, the Vet may proceed with more sophisticated tests. He may do a magnification of the feather structure and surrounding tissues to discover possible superficial fungal disease. In unusual cases, tests for thyroid or liver disorders are indicated.

Once started, feather plucking can become habitual and continue even though the precipitating cause has been eliminated. Chronic repetition of the habit can cause sufficient damage to the follicles to prevent future growth of the feathers. A restraining collar may be required in these cases.

There are probably as many recommended treatments for feather plucking birds as there are Avian Veterinarians. These may consist of simple changes in diet or dietary supplements, advice on management of behavior or hygiene, or as sophisticated as prescriptions for tranquilizers, opposite sex hormones, thyroid supplements, or a host of

others. In any event, start your detective work early in the game and do not delay consultation with your Vet.