

# A Classification of Psittacine Feather Plucking in Australia

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Feather plucking in psittacine birds is a common, complex and frustrating problem in avian practice. To help in the understanding of the problem it would be useful to help breakdown and classify the different clinical syndromes seen.

## A Feather plucking of an individual by other parrots (Cannibalism)

### 1 Nestlings

- By parent birds in the nest
- Seen in all species
- Stops once they leave the nest
- Usually starts on body and extends to the head and tail and flight feathers in extreme cases, interestingly also includes ventral body surfaces
- Can extend to amputation of wings and legs and even death
- Beware concurrent PBFD
- Learnt behaviour
- Treatment in severe cases remove for hand rearing, mild cases will recover once they leave the nest, but should not be used for breeding if possible.

### 2 Fledglings

- By others in the flock
- Usually African lovebirds
- Usually only one or two in a colony of newly fledged chicks
- Can range from feather plucking dorsal body surfaces to severe traumatic injuries haemorrhage and death.
- Treatment remove immediately and will need supplementary feeding and antibiotics if skin trauma

### 3. Adults when overcrowded

- eg in petshops , holding cabinets at end of breeding season
- Budgerigars Neophemas and African lovebirds usually
- Dorsal body feathers usually
- Treatment remove these birds immediately and if recognisable remove the ringleaders of the pluckers , improve the overcrowding problem

4. Adults Males on females in breeding season

- Psephotus and Rosellas mainly
- Breeding season
- Distribution around the head mainly
- Treatment nil unless extreme
- Many of these pairs breed successfully

5 Adults on Adults

- Many species Gangs Gangs, Eclectus, Corellas, Queen of Bavaria Conures, Macaws especially seen in our practice
- Often starts on primary and secondary flights and tail feathers
- Often will self mutilate as well as mutilate their mates
- In some young pairs seems to be an extension of adolescent grooming behaviour which becomes obsessive.
- Treatment break the habit before it becomes habitual, distraction therapy , place in a flock if possible. Be sure there are no pathophysiological causes.

6 Young adults or mature adults mutilating themselves

This group is best classified on a species by species basis, with syndromes and possible aetiologies listed for each species. These birds can require extensive diagnostic workups to exclude heavy metal poisonings, localised or systemic infections including chlamydiosis and allergy based skin disease. It would be useful if the syndromes in particular species could be associated with a specific aetiology so as to avoid shotgun diagnostics or shotgun therapeutics.

If no specific aetiology is found then these birds may well be true psychological or endocrinological problems.

a. ***African Lovebirds***

i. Mutilation of wings neck and cloacal areas

- Sometimes with polyfollicles
- Suspect infectious aetiology What?
- Early allergen testing doesn't support allergic basis
- Seen in pet and aviary birds

Response to a wide range of antibiotic antifungal and collaring treatments is unrewarding in my hands

ii. Generalised feather plucking

- Must differentiate from PBFD, clinically this can be difficult
- As per all other parrots

b. ***Budgerigars***

i. Mutilation with polyfollicles

- Similar but often without the skin trauma seen in African lovebirds
- Nearly always with polyfollicles

ii. generalised feather plucking, always in pet birds

- Not that common in our practice
- Low incidence may be a response of budgerigar being better adapted to life as a caged bird.

c ***Gang Gangs***

Any age groups, probably the most difficult and dramatic of feather plucking problem seen in Australian aviculture.

- Seen in caged and aviary birds
- Entire body surface including tail and wings, very rarely damage skin
- Probably psychological in this highly social and intelligent psittacine.

d ***Rosellas***

- Cage and aviary birds
- Seasonal with breeding season, both males and females
- Chest and abdomen mainly

e ***Lorikeets***

- Cage and aviary birds
- Non seasonal, both males and females
- Chest and abdomen mainly (Note young lorikeets especially but also other parrots abrade tail and flights on wire, this should not be confused with self mutilation or PBFD)

f ***Quarries***

- Pet birds almost exclusively
- Associated with giardia in USA (Australia ??)
- Increased incidence in egg laying females ??
- Otherwise as per other psittacine birds
- Chest and shoulders and dorsal wings mainly

g ***Corellas***

- Cage and aviary birds
- Wings and tail feathers, occasionally extend to skin damage

h ***Galahs***

Several different syndromes

- i. body feathers plus or minus flights and tail feathers
- ii. Flight and tail feathers exclusively
- iii. Severe mutilation to skin

- All almost exclusively pet birds
- Some associated with hysterical anxiety type behaviour in younger birds.

i      ***Sulphur crested cockatoos:*** Syndromes as per Galahs

- Usually pet birds
- Sometimes but rare in aviary birds

j      ***Eclectus Parrots*** seen in both pet and aviary birds

- Self mutilate and mutilate mate
- Beware Pbfd in these birds
- Seasonal form associated with breeding activity in some pairs
- Non seasonal syndrome often with severe erythema and seborrhoea
- This form may have infective or allergenic basis.

k      ***Asiatics***

- Usually only in pet birds
- Body wall and shredding of tail and flight feathers
- Often highly strung, emotional birds, but not as bad as the galahs with similar behaviour.

J      ***African Greys***

Young adults shredding body and tail and flight feathers

l      ***All species***

- Localised mutilation of feathers and often skin and muscle in a particular area such as thigh or wing
- Examine closely for localised pathology ie radiography biopsy