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Bird Grooming

Introduction:

Routine grooming is an important part of bird care. Regular grooming, including wing, beak, and nail trims is important for the safety and comfort of both the bird and the owner. Avian veterinarians and many pet shops provide grooming services. With practice, many owners can learn to groom their birds safely. An advantage to having your avian veterinarian groom your bird is that your bird can be given a complete health examination at the same time. Below are important points to keep in mind when grooming your bird.

Wings:

Most bird experts agree it is best to keep the wings of pet birds clipped, not only to prevent flight, but also to aid in training and handling. Birds that are allowed free flight easily become injured as they fly into closed windows, ceiling fans, and out the window. We also find that free-flighted birds are more apt to become nippy and are likely to resist handling.

We recommend clipping both wings to prevent the bird from becoming unbalanced if he or she attempts to fly. The number of feathers to be cut depends on the body shape and natural athletic ability of the bird. Amazons and African Greys may need only the outside 7 feathers cut, while slender bodied birds such as conures, cockatiels, macaws, and parakeets may need up to 10 feathers cut. Birds may need to be "flight tested" in a safe room after trimming to see if more feathers need to be removed.

To clip your bird's wings, you will need a towel, scissors, and anticoagulant powder, such as Kwik-stop. It is easiest to groom your bird with two people, one to hold and one to trim. Capture the bird carefully in a towel and hold it with your hand over its back, fingers firmly grasping either side of the mandibles. Be cautious not to apply too much pressure around the bird's chest, which could hinder its breathing.

Inspect each feather before cutting, and cut only mature, clear-shafted flight feathers. Growing feathers will have a dark blue/black or pink shaft in comparison to nearby mature feathers. Do not cut until the feathers mature, as the growing feathers have a blood supply and cutting them will cause bleeding. If an immature feather is cut by mistake, you must pull the entire feather out. Grasp near the base with forceps or pliers and pull gently but firmly. Apply pressure to the site to stop bleeding.



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Nails:

In many cases, nail trimming is done for the owners' comfort, not the birds. Some birds' nails seldom need trimming, while others seem to grow long and sharp quickly. Nail trimming can be done with dog nail clippers or other cutting instruments. At Avian and Exotic Animal Clinic, we prefer an electric dremmel tool to grind the end of the nail rather than cut it. Heat cautery is a very good way for trimming smaller birds' (quakers>>finches) nails, as it simultaneously cuts and cauterizes.

Nails have both a nerve and blood supply. With light-colored nails, you may be able to see the blood vessel and avoid trimming them too short. With dark-colored nails, it is impossible to know exactly how much to trim. Remove enough nail to blunt the sharp tip and keep an anticoagulant powder handy in case you do draw blood from the trim. Again, an advantage of the dremmel tool or heat cautery is that they will cauterize the nail as it trims.

Bathing:

Birds should be allowed to bathe several times weekly. Small birds prefer to use a small bowl or flat dish of water. Misting or showering larger birds is a good habit for feather and respiratory health. It can be a fun experience for the bird and the owner if your bird is trained young and positively reinforced. Room temperature water should be used for misting or showering.

Damaged Wing & Tail Feathers:

Occasionally birds will break, fray, or damage their long wing and tail feather. This damage will not be corrected until the next molt. Sometimes, these feathers should be pulled to promote the growth of new healthy feathers. If many feathers need to be pulled or if they are broken off near the skin, anesthesia may be required to pull them safely.