

Grooming in Pet Birds

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Grooming a bird refers to clipping wing feathers, trimming claws (nails), and on occasion, smoothing and trimming the beak. A veterinarian or experienced technician can perform this service on an otherwise healthy bird. Some disease states can result in nail and beak problems; consequently, all birds should be properly examined at regular intervals every 6 to 12 months.

Nail Trims

Most birds need regular nail trims, which can be as frequent as every few weeks, depending on the individual bird. Cement perches can help keep sharp nail tips blunted on some birds. Sandpaper perch covers can be eaten by birds or result in sore feet and should not be used. Rough perches of any material should be used cautiously because birds can develop pododermatitis from standing on inappropriate surfaces for prolonged periods.

What is the recommended length to trim a bird's claws? In some cases, it is obvious that the nails are overgrown; in others, the nails are not too long, but they are sharp and uncomfortable for the owner. The goal is to effectively blunt the nail tip without hitting the painful blood supply. The very tip of the claw can be cut without vascular compromise, but very little length will be removed. The claw should never be cut higher than the plane of the plantar surface of the foot.

It takes an experienced eye to know where the vascular layer is located in a bird's claw. In smaller species (e.g., budgerigars, canaries, cockatiels), the nails are often transparent and the blood supply is easy to see. Transilluminating the nail with a penlight can provide a clearer view of the blood supply. In larger birds with dark nails, visualization of the vascular tissue is difficult. Cautery supplies should be within easy reach during trimming. Silver nitrate sticks and styptic powder are readily available and easy to use. Styptic powder can be placed into a tuberculin syringe with the tip cut off to create an easy applicator. The bleeding nail tip can be placed directly into the powder-filled syringe for speedy application.

Nail trimming requires good restraint and appropriate tools. To avoid injuries to the nails and toes, do not attempt to cut nails unless a bird is well restrained. A handheld emery board (to gently file down sharp edges) is safest to use, but once appropriate restraint

This article is based on an original article first published in the *Hartz Exotic Health Newsletter of Practical Medicine for Veterinary Professionals*, produced by Hartz Mountain Corporation.

is achieved, several trimming instruments can be used. A foldable human nail clipper can be used for small- and medium-sized birds. Guillotine or scissor-type nail clippers used on cats and dogs work well with larger, thicker nails. Sharp edges created by the initial cut can be filed down using an emery board. Electric filing tools (e.g., a Dremel drill) work well, but care must be taken to ensure that other toes are safely out of the way. A penlight cautery unit with a looped hot-wire end can be a quick and efficient way to cut and cauterize simultaneously, especially in birds that weigh <150 g. The downside of this tool is its cost and the propensity to cut too short because bleeding is not apparent.

Wing Feather Clips

The purpose of a wing feather clip is to safely reduce uplift and full flight in companion birds. This is generally recommended because it decreases the possibility of escapes and flying accidents. Wing feather clipping can also improve pet quality because clipped birds are easier to tame and handle.

It is important for all bird owners to know that wing feather clips do not completely eliminate a bird's ability to fly. A clipped bird taken outside can still catch an updraft or take off at low levels and travel far enough to get lost or injured. Body conformation can also affect the outcome of the wing feather clip, and it takes experience to know which birds require a shorter, more aggressive clip. Light-bodied birds (e.g., cockatiels, Senegal parrots, conures) often require more feathers to be cut, while in heavier species (e.g., Amazon parrots, African greys) or obese birds, fewer feathers are removed. Birds that are transported often or have access to the outdoors need special considerations.

In clipping the wing feathers, it is important to first check for the new, growing "blood feathers" (**FIGURE 1**). These feathers have a visible purple or pink blood supply in the shaft and will bleed profusely if

Recommended Reading

Spadafori G, Speer BL. *Birds for Dummies*. Foster City, CA: IDG Books Worldwide; 1999.

Speer BL. The clinical consequences of routine grooming procedures. *Proc Annu Assoc Avian Vet Conf* 2001; 109-115.

Welle K. *Psittacine Behavior Handbook*. Association of Avian Veterinarians; 1999.



Figure 1. Blood feathers have a visible purple or pink blood supply in the shaft.
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Figure 2. The first seven or eight primary feathers are clipped in this wing trim.
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broken or cut. During a molt, there may be several blood feathers on a wing, and this will limit the ability to perform a full clip. Blood feathers eventually grow out; when the blood supply recedes, the feathers can be cut. Owners should be informed that blood feathers that are present during a wing clip will need to be cut in a few weeks.

Several different methods are used to cut a bird's wing feathers. One method is to leave the distal (first three or four) primary flight feathers and then cut the next seven or eight feathers on the wing. The point of this cosmetic or "show" clip is to have the bird appear full flighted when the wings are closed and at rest. Unfortunately, many birds can still fly with this type of clip because the distal primary feathers are responsible for forward thrust and lift during flight. This clip can also lose cosmetic appeal, as the uncut primary feathers tend to get caught in cage bars and on toys and become damaged.

Another effective and cosmetic method of wing feather trimming involves cutting the distal (first seven or eight) primary feathers



Figure 3. An Amazon parrot with an overgrown beak tip and thickened keratin layers on the sides and top of its beak. © Dr. Hoefler

(FIGURE 2). These feathers are clipped below the shorter covert feathers and angled outward as the clip moves back toward the body. The first few primary feathers are cut shortest, with the remaining feathers cut progressively longer. Alternatively, the first four or five primaries can be cut down below the covert feathers so the cut ends are hidden from sight. This cut works well in birds such as cockatoos and African greys, which tend to chew cut feather edges.

In baby birds or young birds, it is a good idea to be conservative with both nail and wing feather clips. Young birds tend to be clumsy and insecure and are not well coordinated. The sudden loss of sharp nail tips and wing feathers can cause more falls and lead to injuries. This insecurity can undermine the trusting relationship between owner and bird.

Beak Trims

Beak trims are reserved for birds that have an overgrowth of the tip, a deformity, or an injury from trauma or infection. Some birds get thickened keratin layers on the sides and top of the beak (FIGURE 3) that can be easily and safely filed down with an emery board or a sandstone bit on an electric tool on slow speed.

The tip of the beak is rich in nerve endings and blood supply and can be very painful to the bird if cut too short. It is not always apparent where the blood supply is located in the beak tip. It is possible for the vascular supply to overgrow along with the beak, making visual assessment a judgment call. In smaller species or birds with light-colored beaks, a penlight can be used for transillumination to help identify the blood supply. Caution should be readily available during a beak trim. Silver nitrate sticks and styptic powder can be toxic if ingested and should only be used on a closed beak. Tissue glue and/or electrocautery can also provide hemostasis to a beak tip. Both of these methods of hemostasis should be used cautiously, for obvious reasons.

For beak trimming, the safest method is using an emery board to file down long, sharp tips or ridges. In larger species, an electric tool with a grinding sandstone bit works well. For major beak work, handheld instruments such as wire cutters or human foldable toenail clippers can be used. The beak is then gently shaped using files or an electric tool. Major beak repairs may need to be performed while the bird is under general anesthesia. Some birds need multiple trims and shapings before the beak assumes a normal conformation and occlusion.

A Word About Improper Grooming

Psittacine birds are intelligent, sensitive animals that can suffer great emotional and physical trauma from improper grooming. Primary wing feathers that are cut too short can be uncomfortable and may result in feather chewing or mutilation. Wings and nails that are cut too short can result in prolonged discomfort and increase the number of falling incidents. Falling not only results in injuries but also can undermine the secure and trusting relationship between bird and human. Grooming procedures should be performed with thoughtful, gentle techniques and respect for the human-animal bond.