

Examine Plumage to Detect Health Problems

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff



The condition of your bird's plumage is a primary indicator of his overall health. If you spot missing, ruffled, damaged, or worn feathers, you know to take corrective action. But why wait for trouble? A better approach is to shift your focus to preventive care to ensure consistent, good health.

We recommend checking your bird daily for many health indicators. For example, is he eating properly? Are his eyes bright? Is he active? At least once a month, we recommend that you take a new inventory of his plumage, and then compare it against your findings of the previous month. If you have a digital camera, this would be an excellent opportunity to put it to good use.

The plumage of every species has its own unique character. Using the following criteria as a starting point, you can create a personalized rating system for your pet. Your pet's plumage should be. . .

- **Soft** - feathers should be strong, yet flexible
- **Smooth** - no rough feather shafts; no uneven or split edges
- **Glossy** - sheen extends over the entire coat
- **Full** - thick, where it needs to be
- **Vivid** - color should be deep, bright and uniform
- **Clean** - free of dust, dander, waste, or soil
- **Parasite-Free** - no lice or mites

Using the following checklist, you can establish a benchmark rating for your bird's plumage and become more attuned to the condition of your pet. Monthly re-examination will help indicate whether you need to make adjustments in your care regimen.

Plumage Criteria:	Months:												Notes:
	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	
Soft													
Smooth													

Glossy													
Full													
Vivid													
Clean													
Parasite-Free													
<i>E = Excellent G = Good F = Fair P = Poor</i>													

Plumage maintenance

If your regular examinations produce ratings anything less than excellent, you need to consider what factors might be at play, and what measures you can take for improvement. Because health factors work together in a complex, interdependent manner, it can be hard to identify a single deficiency or need.

- **Diet** is a primary factor affecting the color of plumage. Consult a species guide to determine which nutrients are important to your bird's coloration. To ensure your bird is getting essential vitamins, consider use of a supplement like [Avi-Era Bird Vitamins](#). If your bird's skin is dry and itchy, or his plumage is lackluster, fatty acids may be needed in the diet. These are readily available in products like [Skin & Plumage Supplement](#).



- **Bathing** is natural and essential for your bird, it helps maintain plumage by removing dust, extra oils, dander, loose feathers, and insect pests; while supplying supplemental moisture. Bathing also maintains the insulation properties of feathers, moistens the skin, and much more. Soap should never be used because it robs feathers and skin of natural oils. Specialized products such as [Feather Glo](#) penetrate under feathers to clean, while [Bird Bath Spray](#) restores natural preening gland oil.

- **Feather picking** may be an indication of physical, emotional, or environmental problems. The solution may not be simple and may take some time. If the problem is due to dryness, raising the humidity will help, as will more frequent bathing. Changing the diet, offering less seed and more greens and fresh fruits and vegetables may also help. Affording your bird more freedom and opportunity for exercise can help to break the destructive pattern. Topical sprays can be used to discourage picking and help break the habit.

- **Sunlight** is essential to maintaining vitamin levels and plumage. However, it is often hard to supply to caged birds. If you position your bird's cage near a window, make sure that a portion of the cage remains totally in shade so that your bird has a safe retreat if it becomes overheated. Never leave a cage unsupervised in the direct sun. Keep in mind that some birds are made anxious by the activity outside windows. A safe way to provide necessary sunlight to all birds is with use of an artificial, [full-spectrum light](#) for no more than ten hours per day.



- **Pesticides** will control the lice and mites that make your bird miserable, and his plumage mangy. For extended control, you can place an insect protector in your bird's cage. When using a [topical spray](#) on your bird, be sure to spray the cage thoroughly at the same time, and repeat as the manufacturer's directions indicate.

- **Exercise** will keep your bird fit and relaxed. A key result is a healthier plumage. Provide [toys](#) in the cage. If possible, allow your bird to fly. And always use a variety of [perches](#) to make sure your bird's feet and legs are exercised daily.

Even the healthiest of birds need help at times. Be vigilant. If you encounter problems that you do not understand, or appear to be serious, see your veterinarian for assistance.