

Good Grooming

Parrot grooming is an important routine practice for any responsible bird owner. There are several places that we need to pay attention to:

Beak: Beaks are used for far more than just eating; for parrots, their beak serves as a hand, used in climbing, playing, and exploring their world. It's a vital tool in their own self grooming.

If a bird's beak grows too long or unevenly, it can drastically limit their mobility, and eating and preening turns from simple daily activities into difficult, even impossible, tasks. Like rodent's teeth, bird's beaks continuously grow and need to be constantly worn down. This is accomplished in the wild by constantly chewing hard woods and nuts, and by actively grinding their upper and lower beaks against each other. In the home, regularly providing calcium blocks, cuttlebones (right), lava stones, and chewable perches and toys are a simple and effective method of ensuring a bird maintains a healthy beak.



Note: A continuously overgrown, uneven beak might be a sign of health issues, especially problems with your bird's liver. If you suspect your bird's beak is too long or potentially harmful you should immediately take it to a veterinarian for examination.

Nails: A parrot's nails help them with their perching, balance, and are used to grip and hold. Overgrown nails will make perching difficult for a bird, as well as increase the chance of catching a nail on carpet or clothing. Additionally, sharp nails can make owners hesitant to handle their bird. A good rule of thumb is that the nails are too long if the toe is elevated off the ground when the feet are placed on a flat surface. Even short nails may need to be blunted to remove sharp points.

Various sized manicure perches will aid in the reduction of pointy nails. Avoid sandpaper perches which can cause foot problems such as blistering and raw spots. Birds will also chew on their own nails to shorten them, but not all the time. In this case, their nails will need to be trimmed.



Feathers: Birds do a great deal of grooming and preening, a process greatly helped by giving them a bath! So, why is bathing healthy for a bird? It has to do with the distribution of the birds natural preening oils. A dusty residual is taken from the birds preening gland and spread throughout the bird's feathers during bath time which gives it that soft and silky look. This process keeps their feathers clean and free of dirt. However, without routine showers they would normally receive from the rain, the oils build up and eventually turn your bird into an unsightly oil slicked pet.



Plus, a lot of birds *love* their bath time!

Some birds prefer to be misted while others like bathing, and yet others like actual showers. A spray bottle can be set on mist and aimed up and over the bird so the water falls onto the bird like a misty rain. For smaller birds that like bathing, a dish with an inch of water in it can be placed in the bottom of the cage; be sure to remove it after the birds have bathed. For birds that prefer showers, using the sink is the perfect place. Give them a perch or let them run under the water as they want. For larger birds, the shower can be a great place to get them wet; just be sure to supervise them. Keep constant track of the temperature of the water, so the bird does not become too cold or possibly burned if the water temperature suddenly changes. Some birds like daily wet-downs while others do fine on a weekly basis, but it is important to note, during molting phase bathing should be more frequent to ensure a healthy molt.

Birds go through molts twice a year, where most of their feathers are replaced together. New feathers emerge as something called a pin feather. The young soft and fluffy feather is wrapped in a keratin sheath, similar to your nails. They'll have a vein inside of them that supplies nutrients to the still-developing feather – this is why they're also called blood feathers. During molting, which usually happens in the spring and



fall (although because they're indoors it can spread out over months and seem to overlap) these new feathers are very irritating. Bathing helps soothe their irritated skin, gets rid of the sheath pieces, and starts the spread of the protective oils over the feather.

Tip: Gently using your fingers to help gently break up some of the pin feather sheaths around their head, the ones they have trouble getting to, can be a very bonding experience with your bird – it's like you're a member of their flock grooming them.

Take your bird's lead in the matter. If the bird is not feeling well, skip the bath or misting until he is feeling better to avoid chilling or stressing him.

Wings: This topic causes a great deal of controversy among avian enthusiasts. Trimming wings does not mean they cannot fly at all. The ends of their flight feathers are trimmed just enough to reduce lift, so that they cannot gain any altitude and can coast to a landing.

Note: This only applies to parrots. Perching birds such as canaries and other finches that stay in the cage should *never* have their wings clipped. Pin/blood feathers should *never* be cut.



The people against it point out that flight and the muscles used during it are a vital part of their respiration process. Without the freedom of the air, their flight muscles will get weak and atrophy. Plus, being creatures of the air, denying them that freedom is cruel and not natural.

Proponents of wing trims point out the benefits: It can help keep some birds calmer and easier to work with, since they have to depend on you and cannot fly away to get away from you when they want. Exercise when out of their cage will keep their flight muscles in shape and help keep their respiratory system healthy. A proper diet of pellets, fruits, and vegetables and few seeds means they are less at risk of obesity, so they do not need to work excess weight off. It's most important from a safety point of view – yes, birds do fly, but inside the house is not the place for that. There are so many dangers present in the home that birds are not used to; birds have been known to fly into windows, into pots of boiling water or other food, into ceiling fans, etc.

The flight feathers do grow back during molting season, so it's not a permanent situation, and will need to be redone twice a year – it's important to keep it up so that they don't unexpectedly fly up and out the window or open door.

Here at WPC we believe clipping wings is necessary for all social birds that are allowed out of the cage to protect them in our homes. Even calm birds that are trusted can get scared by the unexpected, and it only takes once.

Nail and wing trims can be done at home, but it can be very difficult to properly hold the bird. There are blood vessels in the nails and still-growing feathers that, if cut, can bleed out a lot, so they should only be done by vets and trained pet professionals, like the staff here at Wilmette Pet Center – plus, there no appointment is needed here!

Beak trims need to be done *very* carefully and should not be attempted at home.

Keeping your bird properly groom is one of the first and most basic steps in taking care of them and making sure they do not come to harm.