

# The Silent Signals of Bird Distress

Learn to decode the hidden distress signals of pet birds. From changes in vocalization to alarming self-harm behaviors, discover how to recognize the early signs of stress and implement effective strategies to ensure your feathered friend's happiness and health.

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your pet bird doesn't get enough attention and environmental enrichment, he may become bored, stressed out or unhappy — or all of the above
- Knowing your bird's normal behaviors is crucial in recognizing signs of stress early; anytime your bird has a change in behavior, it's possible illness, stress or anxiety are to blame
- A stressed bird may either become more vocal, with louder or more frequent calls, or may become unusually quiet
- Plucking their own feathers is common in pet birds and is often a manifestation of boredom or other mental distress; changes in appetite, biting and other behavioral changes can also be due to stress
- Consult with an avian veterinarian if your bird is showing signs of stress or anxiety; increased environmental enrichment and interaction with family members is usually necessary

Pet birds can make wonderful, entertaining companions, but they're curious, intelligent and require daily enrichment to stay mentally healthy. If your pet bird doesn't get enough attention and environmental enrichment, he may become bored, stressed out or unhappy — or all of the above.

When birds are sick, they often hide signs of illness until they're in critical condition. However, if your bird is unhappy, it may be obvious. She may scream loudly, bite or resort to self-harm, for instance. But it can also be difficult to spot signs of stress in birds, unless you know what to look for.

## Top Signs of Stress in Pet Birds

Knowing your bird's normal behaviors is crucial in recognizing signs of stress early. Anytime your bird has a change in behavior, it's possible illness, stress or anxiety are to blame. I recommend consulting with an avian veterinarian if you're not sure whether your bird is happy and healthy. However, here are some top signs of stress to watch out for in the meantime.

## Changes in Vocalization

A stressed bird may either become more vocal, with louder or more frequent calls, or may become unusually quiet. A stressed bird may scream, chirp repetitively, screech or make alarm calls.<sup>1</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, if your bird is bored or depressed, decreased vocalizations may result. Any changes in the normal vocal patterns of your bird

can be a sign of distress.

## Feather Picking and Self-Mutilation

Plucking their own feathers is common in pet birds and is often a manifestation of boredom or other mental distress. However, it can also be linked to nutritional deficiencies.

“Some birds will start picking as a result of an initiating cause, such as a loud noise or construction in the house, changes in their routine, boredom, or metabolic stressors (nutritional or medical),” PetMD reported. “They may continue to pick even when that initiating stimulus is removed or the condition is resolved.”<sup>2</sup>

Birds under stress may not only start to pluck their own feathers but may also engage in other forms of self-harm, including chewing their skin, which can progress to profound, deep wounds. In studies of pet birds, causes of feather-damaging behaviors include:<sup>3</sup>

- Boredom
- Lack of foraging opportunities and nutritional deficiencies
- Unsuitable cage size or design, environmental stress
- Loneliness
- Social isolation, including absence of the preferred owner
- Always caged
- Living with other parrots
- Separation anxiety
- Sexual frustration

On the other hand, one study found the risk of feather picking decreased by close to 90% among birds that interacted with people for at least four hours a day.<sup>4</sup>

## Appetite Changes

Birds experiencing stress might eat less than usual or suddenly stop eating. Because stress can also affect a bird's digestive system, you may also notice changes in the appearance of droppings, including being more watery than normal or a different color.

## Biting or Other Behavior Changes

A stressed bird might become more aggressive or show signs of fear, such as retreating to a corner of the cage or suddenly not wanting to be handled when it previously enjoyed it. Some birds may also start biting. PetMD explains:

*“While many people misinterpret birds’ biting as an act of aggression, this behavior is often a sign of stress and fear. Birds will frequently bite and lunge to try to protect themselves when they are afraid; they may bite humans, other birds, or the bars of their cage.”<sup>5</sup>*

## Why Do Birds Get Stressed?

In the U.S. alone, more than 20 million parrots are kept as pets, and many of them aren't given enough stimuli to meet their cognitive and emotional needs.<sup>6</sup> Often, they're the only parrot in the household, never getting a chance to form relationships with or interact with other parrots or even a human surrogate.

Yet, in the wild, parrots live in the company of other birds and typically form long-term bonds with one partner. In captivity, being forced to live with another parrot can cause stress, but parrots that don't get enough socialization may also develop severe behavioral problems, including becoming aggressive or pulling out their feathers.<sup>7</sup>

As such, lack of interaction, with other birds or their owner, is a top cause of stress in birds, as is lack of mental stimulation. A stressful environment, including noise, abnormal lighting and housing, chaos and too many unfamiliar visitors, may also stress your bird out, as can changes in routine, including feeding times and playtime. A monotonous or nutritionally unbalanced diet with inadequate foraging opportunities and minimal daily environmental enrichment can also cause both physical and mental stress in birds.

## Help for Your Stressed-Out Bird

Birds are high-maintenance creatures, and because many folks don't research species-appropriate care prior to acquiring a pet, many parrots are abandoned at rescues when their owners decide they require too much attention and care. So, if you're considering birds and especially a parrot for a pet, please do extensive research to be sure you're up to the challenge.

It's our job as guardians to provide the best life possible for any life under our care, and birds are among the most demanding of choices. If your bird is showing signs of stress, seek help from an avian veterinarian and be sure you're feeding your bird a species-appropriate, diversified, fresher food diet.

Along with offering extensive food choices, offer your bird daily food foraging experiences. This involves allowing them to work for their food, which research shows animals prefer. Foraging could mean your bird needs to move things around in order to get to foods or must open something to access some foods. It isn't uncommon for birds to hang upside down just to reach their favorite food item. Rotate food foraging toys and DIY enrichment opportunities daily.

Mixing a variety of fresh, natural and appropriate foods together stimulates curiosity, encourages foraging behaviors and is a great way to introduce new (potentially healthier) foods. For instance, you can make a mash that consists of soaked and sprouted seeds and grains, diced and shredded vegetables, fresh or dried edible flowers, with fruit and raw nuts. For omnivorous parrots, consider adding live mealworms, waxworms and crickets to their diet, sourced from chemical-free bug farms. Always offer filtered water you refresh daily.

I also recommend offering a variety of nontoxic, indestructible and destructible (disposable) toys and boredom-busting enrichment opportunities daily to maintain your bird's creative interest and engagement in play. In addition, plenty of time outside of a cage, engaging in enjoyable training sessions and with ample time for socializing, grooming and conversation will help keep your pet bird in good spirits and stay connected, socially.

In addition to addressing your bird's mental, emotional and nutritional needs, offering access to direct sunlight via an outside aviary or avian UV bulb for 8 hours a day is a must, for adequate vitamin D production and circadian rhythm wellbeing. Minimize exposure to endocrine-disrupting chemicals by switching from conventional home cleaning

products to natural alternatives and never use home scenting products or Teflon cookware around birds.

## Sources and References

<sup>1,2,5</sup> [PetMD January 4, 2024](#)

<sup>3</sup> [PLoS One. 2021; 16\(7\): e0254610](#)

<sup>4</sup> [J Avian Med Surg. 2014 Jun;28\(2\):109-17. doi: 10.1647/2012-073R](#)

<sup>6</sup> [CHI '23: Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems April 2023 Article No.: 534 Pages 1–16](#)

<sup>7</sup> [World Animal Protection March 11, 2022](#)

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