**MOLTING**

**UNDERSTANDING YOUR BIRD**

During its regular molting period, your bird will slowly replace most of its feathers. This is a tough time for your pet. It uses extra energy to generate the new feathers, and is often stressed. Birds that sing or talk will do so less often during its molting period. The period can last anywhere from several weeks to several months. Parrot species in particular are known to have extremely long molting periods.

More than ever, this is the time to ensure that your bird has the nutritional diet that it needs. You should increase the amount of food that you give it by at least 25%. Some stores will sell special molting food, but you can also just add fresh vegetables, fruits, and cereals to your bird’s diet.

It is also important to make sure that your bird’s environment is warm during molting. Feathers function as [INSULATION[http://cdncache1-a.akamaihd.net/items/it/img/arrow-10x10.png](http://www.hartz.com/Birds/Health_and_Nutrition/Health/understanding_molting.aspx)](http://www.hartz.com/Birds/Health_and_Nutrition/Health/understanding_molting.aspx), and the loss of even a few feathers can make your pet vulnerable to drafts.

Your bird will naturally feel more defensive and fearful during the molting process. In the wild, birds often find a quiet, dark place to rest, as the process consumes much of their surplus energy. Help your bird out by providing it with the quiet that it needs. You can also give it a small measure of privacy by covering part of the cage. Your bird will feel more comfortable and be less stressed during the molting process.

As parrot owner's we know how special parrots are. They are the only creatures on earth that have feathers. Feathers are not only used for the magnificent and wondrous voyage of flight, but insulate and protect our feathered friends. Psittacine feathers consist of four types: down feathers, semiplumes, bristles, and the contour feathers.

Down and semiplume feathers are the fluffy feathers closest to the birds body. They insulate the body and provide support for the contour feathers.

Bristles are still course feathers that look like thin hairs, but they do not have the interlocking barbs. These feathers can be found on the head, nares, and around the eyes.

Contour feathers cover the body, wings, and tail. They are also referred to as: coverts, remiges, and retrices. The covert feathers cover the head, wings, and body. Remiges, (also called primary and secondary flight feathers) provide a bird's take off ability for flight. Tail feathers are used for direction of flight. Contour feathers can take anywhere from 14 to 140 days, depending on the size of the bird and location of the feather, to completely form and open.

Molting is defined as the natural process for the gradual replacement of old, tattered, or damaged feathers with new feather growth.

This process can last for several months, with the larger parrots taking longer to complete their molt. Parrots will only molt out several feathers at a time so that flight is not inhibited. Not every feather will be replaced in each molt. Flight feathers may only be replaced every other year.

Generally, birds molt once a year at about the same time each year. Species and age will determine when your bird molts. Stress can also influence molting and cause a bird to enter the molting stage early and quickly, causing a hard molt.

Smaller birds can enter their first molt several weeks after fledging. Larger parrots such as Amazons, Greys, and Cockatoos will generally begin their first molt at around 9 to 10 months of age.

Most birds may molt gracefully going unnoticed by their owners, while a few may have a somewhat scruffy appearance. It is not natural for a bird to have bare or bald spots during molting. All bald spots should be examined by an avian vet. The easiest way to know for sure whether your bird is molting or not, is to check for the appearance of pin feathers.

Pin feathers, also called blood feathers, will emerge encased in a sheath called a quill. The quill is whitish in color and has a clear plastic-like appearance. The quill will contain a blood vein. As the feather grows inside of the quill, the blood vein retracts and the quill flakes off and disintegrates.

Birds will remove the quills from the pin feathers and pairs will preen each other to remove the old sheaths. Singly kept birds will benefit from having their owners preen the new feathers in the places that they can't reach such as their head and neck area. Before you preen your bird's new pin feathers check for the presence of blood feathers. New blood feathers are quite sensitive and your bird will surely let you know if you accidently try to preen one of them. Then, gently roll the end of the quill between your fingers to remove the sheath. The sheath should fall off easily.

While birds are molting they need extra moisture to prevent the feather sheath from becoming dry and hard. If this happens, then the feather will be prevented from opening. If this happens to a flight or tail feather, you need to soften the sheath using warm water, then gently remove the sheath. If this is not done soon after the sheath would have naturally been removed, the feather will be useless. If this occurs with more than one feather during a molt, then a vitamin or mineral deficiency may be present, so a vet check is recommended to find out what changes need to be made in the bird's current diet.

**Bathe or spray your bird daily with plain warm water. This will also help alleviate some of the itchiness birds experience during this time. You may even notice your bird scratching more often while molting.**

A bird's feathers are comprised primarily of protein. The addition of protein before and during a molt may be beneficial in promoting new healthy plumage. Some sources for protein are hard boiled eggs, cooked chicken bones, insects, etc. Be sure to check with your avian vet about your bird's total diet and the addition of extra protein or other supplements. Too much protein can be as harmful as too little.

**During molting your bird may experience a few behavioral changes. The sensitive new feathers can be painful to touch, and the itchiness caused from the flaking feather sheaths, may make your bird a little uncomfortable and moody. So don't be surprised if your bird doesn't want as many head scratches as usual.**

Examine your birds new feathers during molting, looking for any signs of abnormal feathers which can be a sign of an underlying medical condition. Any suspicious looking feathers should be examined immediately by an avian vet. Also check flight feathers to see if a wing clipping is needed. I recommend that wing clipping be performed after the completion of the molt. Clipping the new individual feathers as they emerge from the feather shaft will leave the new emerging feathers without any support. Unsupported and unprotected blood feathers can be easily damaged. A broken blood feather can become a serious problem if blood loss is excessive.

Safety is extremely important during this time. Smaller birds can take flight when just a few new flight feathers have emerged. Take extra precautions during this time to prevent injuries and accidental escape