

Nail Trimming in Birds

Peter S. Sakas DVM, MS

Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center

7278 N. Milwaukee Ave. Niles, IL 60714

Ph 847-647-9325 FAX 847-647-8498

www.nilesanimalhospital.com

Nail trimming is probably the most frequently performed grooming procedure. Nails overgrow readily and become quite sharp in pet birds, as they spend most of their time on perches with little opportunity for wear. Overgrown nails are problematic due to the risk of breakage or snagging, but also long, sharp nails can be painful to the owner when the bird is perching on the arm or shoulder, which is usually what prompts the request for grooming in the first place. Nail wear can be facilitated by having the bird walk on a variety of surfaces or possibly by placing a coarse surfaced perch, such as a cement perch, in the cage. Sandpaper perch covers can be irritating to the feet and do not wear the nails down adequately.

A variety of instruments can be used for trimming toenails and this will depend on the size of the bird. Small bird toenails can be trimmed with human fingernail clippers, small pet nail clippers and sharp wire clippers. Small parrots and larger birds require larger clippers, such as quality dog nail clippers, either guillotine or side cut, or larger wire clippers. A variable speed Dremel™ tool with a cone-shaped grinding attachment is ideal for trimming toenails. It enables one to trim a nail further back than clipping, as it does cauterize the nail somewhat. Another advantage is that the nail can be shaped to remove sharp edges. This can also be accomplished by using a fingernail file following clipping. The type of instrument selected is a matter of preference and the degree of success in problem-free grooming. It is important that devices used to clip nails have sharp edges to prevent nail trauma and a painful clip, so check them periodically.

When performing the nail trim, it can be difficult to determine how far back to trim. With birds that have white nails the task is somewhat easier, as the blood vessels can be visualized as a pink or red coloration in the nail. The clip is made just distal to the apparent blood vessel. In small birds, this can be readily accomplished by clipping the nails. Larger birds can have the nails ground down to have a smoother edge or clipped and then smoothed. The procedure is more challenging when the nails are black. It then becomes a matter of experience to know how far back to trim.

Nails that are very overgrown create problems because the quick will extend further out into the nail than normal. Trimming to a more typical length is difficult due to the likelihood of bleeding. When clipping a grossly overgrown nail, this is more of a certainty. If the nail is ground with a variable speed Dremel™ some cautery will occur while trimming, enabling the nail to be trimmed shorter. Some means of hemostasis should always be within reach during any grooming procedures. Agents to stop bleeding include styptic powder, styptic pencils, Quik-Stop, tissue glue, corn starch, flour, baking soda, small piece of soap (place on end of nail) and silver nitrate sticks.

Problems that can occur during nail trimming include cutting nails too short so that they bleed. When this occurs it can be quite painful to the bird. Following such a trimming the bird may hold its foot up and this can be upsetting to the bird as well as the owner. Another problem with trimming nails too short (not necessarily involving bleeding) is that the bird may have difficulty holding onto the perch. Some reasonable length should remain so that the bird can have a grip on the perch. It can be quite upsetting if the bird continues to slide off the perch if the nail trim was too short.

Adapted from *Avian Medicine: A Practitioner's Guide 2nd Edition*. Peter S. Sakas DVM. AAHA Press 2002.