

Grooming 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

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.

Do not assume that an overgrown beak is strictly due to the lack of beak activity or chewing. When a client brings their bird in for grooming and has never had an examination (or if it has been longer than a year) the technician (or whomever is performing the trim) should recommend a physical examination. In this way an evaluation can be made to determine a possible cause for any beak abnormalities.

The same instruments used for trimming toenails can be used on the beak. The variable speed Dremel™ tool is outstanding for trimming and shaping the beak as the speed can be controlled to minimize vibration, depending upon the size of the bird. The noise created by the Dremel™ can frighten some birds and some head vibration can be noted during the grinding, especially with small birds. If clippers are to be used, it is preferable to leave the beak a little longer than desired with the initial clip and then finish shaping with a Dremel™ or appropriate file as too short of a clip can be painful.

Before trimming a beak, it is essential to have a mental image of the normal appearance of the beak for the type of bird that is being groomed. With this image firmly in mind, the beak can be trimmed to the proper length and shape. Smaller birds, as with nail trimming, can have their beaks clipped with the appropriate instruments for their size. Larger birds require grinding or a combination of clipping and shaping. If the lower beak is overgrown, the upper beak can be gently positioned inside the lower beak. This provides the groomer direct access to the overgrown beak tissue, allowing for quick grooming.

Trimming a beak too short can lead to bleeding and if painful to the bird, it can prevent eating for a variable number of days depending upon the severity of the injury. If using a high-speed grinder, one must always be cautious when shaping the sides of the beak as the hard beak itself is not very thick and a careless groomer could wear through to the underlying vascular and sensitive tissues. Caution must always be exercised when using a grinder on small birds due to the vibration generated during beak trimming and shaping. Hepatic lipidosis (fatty liver) birds should be trimmed with great care, using a grinder sparingly, if at all. During involved beak trimming procedures such as a severe malocclusion, it may be advisable to allow the bird to rest if the procedure is taking a prolonged period of time.

To eliminate stress, it may be advisable to anesthetize a bird for an involved grooming procedure or if the bird is very excitable. The safety of isoflurane anesthesia has reduced the risk involved and is used quite frequently by avian practitioners.

Wing Clipping

Wing clipping is not a necessity but in many instances can be quite important for the well-being of the bird. Generally speaking, wing clipping is recommended due to the large number of dangerous situations a bird can face in the household. Wing clipping can prevent serious accidents such as flying into windows, mirrors, walls or ceiling fans. It will also keep birds from landing on hot cooking surfaces or falling into open containers of water. If the owner is able to monitor the bird carefully and prevents such dangerous situations then wing clipping may not be necessary. Wing clipping prevents accidental escapes through an open door or window. People that have free-flying birds and a lot of traffic in and out of their house should strongly consider wing clipping. In a house with other pets, wing clipping might remove the main advantage a bird has over a rambunctious dog or cat. Most pets live in peaceful coexistence, however, if there is a risk that a dog or cat might go after the bird then perhaps keeping the wings intact would be preferable.

Wing clipping is also an effective tool in the training of birds. A fully-flighted bird tends to be more independent and more difficult to tame. It is an excellent idea to have the wings of a new bird clipped until the bird is adequately trained. If the wing feathers grow back in and the bird continues to be tame and the owner can manage the bird with flight, then the wings can be left alone. Flight is an important part of quality-of-life and exercise for many pet birds. When escape or injury is a threat, seasonal wing-clipping or partial wing clipping (reduced flight) may be an option.

If the bird becomes more independent or aggressive, then the wings need to be re-clipped. Quite often during periods of hormonal behavior birds become aggressive and difficult to handle. Wing clipping, at these times, does seem to be helpful in calming some of the activity. Some high-strung birds, such as African greys or cockatoos, become upset after wing clipping and will chew or shred the cut portions of their wing feathers, especially if longer portions remain of the cut flight feather.

There are several variations used for wing clippings, but a few key principles are involved. Wings should be clipped evenly on both sides. There were some proponents of clipping only one wing, which would unbalance the bird and make flight difficult. It does accomplish that end, however, when birds clipped in such a fashion began to fly they had so little control that they could suffer significant injury. With both wings clipped, a properly clipped bird will be capable of a smooth, descending flight and be unable to attain elevation.

Even after a bird has had a wing clip you cannot be 100% certain that it will be unable to fly when it is taken outside. As birds are so well adapted for flight, if conditions outside were right, even a clipped bird might be capable of enough flight to escape. There are countless instances of bird owners that have lost birds outside that had been clipped (or so they thought). Another type of circumstance is when a bird, that had been clipped, had or is undergoing a molt unbeknownst to the owner and has developed enough new flight feathers that it is now capable of flight.

Another consideration is the type of bird that is having the wings clipped. Some heavier-bodied birds do not need as severe a wing clip as a lighter, more aerodynamic type of bird. For example, Amazon parrots and African grey parrots require less clipping of flight feathers, than a bird such as a cockatiel, to restrict flight. In fact, cockatiels sometimes seem to be capable of flight even after all the flight feathers are clipped! It is recommended to test flight a bird after a wing clip is done if one is uncertain as to the effectiveness of the clip. An ideal type room for test flights would be carpeted with few obstacles and capable of being closed up to prevent escape.

If wings are clipped severely and the bird drops abruptly rather than having a descending flight, significant injury can occur. Three common sites of injury that can occur from too severe of a wing clip are the beak, sternum, and tail base. When the bird is unable to ease descent and they land on a hard, not carpeted surface, they can split the skin over their sternum. The skin at this site is very thin and can easily be traumatized. The tail base laceration injury seems to occur most often in cockatiels, especially young cockatiels that have recently had their wings clipped and were not proficient fliers at the time of the clipping. These birds tend to hit the ground hard with their rumps and tear the skin ventrally at the margin of the uropygium. Both these injuries usually require surgical intervention and could be prevented with proper clippings.

There are two basic types of wing clips, the standard and the cosmetic with variations of each. The standard wing clip involves clipping the first five to ten flight feathers (the primaries) on both wings. The feathers are clipped just below the covert feathers, seen on the dorsal aspect of the wing. However, the Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV) recommends a variation where the feather is clipped near the base, leaving only a short portion of the quill. It is felt that it does not promote feather chewing of the wing fragment by high-strung birds and is still aesthetic. The disadvantage is when the blood feathers come in there is less protection as they are growing out. Whichever method is used, take care using scissors to make a nice even cut; a ragged cut makes it look like the job was butchered even though it might have been effectively done. Aesthetics are important in groomings. The number of primary flight feathers to be trimmed depends upon the type of bird and flying ability. It can be quite a problem if, after a wing clip, a bird is dropping like a stone and suffering injuries. The standard clip is the preferred clip and is more effective at restricting flight.

The cosmetic clip is preferred by some, as when done properly, it is difficult to tell that the bird has had a wing clip when the wings are folded in normal resting position. With the standard clip, as the primary flight feathers are clipped, it is noticeable that the bird has been clipped. The cosmetic clip is accomplished by leaving three or four of the outer primary flight feathers and clipping the remaining primaries and secondary flight feathers (if more flight restriction is desired). As with the standard clip use the covert feathers on the dorsal side of the wing as a guide or clip near the base as the AAV recommends. This type of clip is especially preferred by macaw owners, for example, as the beauty of their wings is maintained. Unfortunately, this type of clip is not very effective in restricting flight. A bird that has this type of clip should not be taken outside as it would be at a great risk for escape.

When clipping the flight feathers, always be on the alert for newly developing feathers that have blood in the shaft (blood feathers). The shaft of the feather will appear to be red or blue, where a completely developed feather will have a shaft that is relatively clear. If a blood feather is accidentally cut it will bleed. When clipping wings avoid cutting the blood feathers, however, do not cut the other fully developed feathers leaving the blood feather remaining without support as there is the strong possibility that with normal activity it will break and bleed. If a blood feather is present, leave a fully developed feather on one side of it to provide support. When the blood feather has fully developed the clip can be completed. If numerous blood feathers are developing, it would be a good idea to postpone the wing clip for a few weeks until they have fully developed. All short wing clips make the bird more prone to breaking blood feathers, as the nearby emerging shafts are not protected by the surrounding feathers. Birds that are prone to blood feather breakage may be best left with a longer clip.

If a blood feather would happen to break then the shaft of the feather should be grasped firmly with fingers or tweezers and pulled out. Merely applying some form of hemostasis at the broken end of the feather and not removing the entire feather may result in the clot loosening with resultant resumption of bleeding. Pressure and clotting powder should then be applied to the feather follicle. Using a cotton tipped applicator dipped in the clotting powder will aid in applying it in the follicle and also expedites placing direct pressure to the follicle, assisting in hemorrhage control. Most bleeding episodes can be controlled with powder to aid in clotting combined with steady pressure. Frequent dabbing or rubbing may interfere with clot formation. After the bleeding has been controlled the bird should be placed in a covered cage or darkened room and periodically checked for bleeding. Agents that can be used to stop bleeding include, styptic powder, styptic pencil, silver nitrate sticks, commercial products such as quickstop, Monsel's powder (ferric subsulfate), or cornstarch, baking soda and flour.

This material was adapted from *Essentials of Avian Medicine: A Guide for Practitioners* (2nd Ed.) by Peter S. Sakas DVM, AAHA Press (2002).