

## **Wing Clipping**

Peter S. Sakas DVM, MS  
Niles Animal Hospital and Bird Medical Center  
7278 N. Milwaukee Ave. Niles, IL 60714  
(847)-647-9325 FAX (847)-647-8498  
[www.nilesanimalhospital.com](http://www.nilesanimalhospital.com)

Wing clipping is not a necessity, but it is generally recommended for pet birds to protect them from many of the dangers in the household. Not only can wing clipping prevent birds from flying into windows, mirrors, walls, and ceiling fans, but it can also keep them from landing on hot cooking surfaces, falling into open containers of water, and escaping through doors or windows accidentally left open. If a bird owner is able to monitor his or her bird carefully and prevent such dangerous situations from developing, then wing clipping may not be necessary. However, those who have free-flying birds and a lot of traffic into and out of their homes should strongly consider wing clipping. Weaned neonates should not be fully clipped until they have some knowledge of flight.

Wing clipping can also be an effective tool in training a bird. Because fully flighted birds tend to be more independent and difficult to tame than birds with clipped wings, owners of new birds should be encouraged to consider clipping their bird's wings until the bird is adequately trained. If the bird continues to be tame after its wing feathers grow back and the owner can manage the bird during flight, then the wings can be left alone.

One situation in which wing clipping may not be desirable is when there is the risk of attack by a cat or dog. Flight is the main advantage that pet birds have over a rambunctious dog or cat.

Because flight is an important part of quality of life and exercise for many pet birds, owners may want to consider seasonal or partial (reduced flight) wing clipping. The former is often appropriate for birds that become aggressive or difficult to handle during periods of hormonal behavior. Wing clipping at these times seems to be helpful in calming some of the activity. However, some high-strung birds, such as African greys and cockatoos, become upset after wing clipping and will chew or shred the cut portions of their wing feathers, especially if longer portions of the cut flight feathers remain.

There are two basic types of wing clips and variations of each (as will be discussed below). However, a few key principles apply no matter what type of wing clip is performed. First, wings should be clipped evenly on both sides. Although there have been some proponents of clipping only one wing, which unbalances the bird and makes flight difficult, birds clipped in this way have so little control when they attempt flight that they run the risk of suffering injury. With both wings properly clipped, a bird will be capable of a smooth, descending flight but will not be able to attain elevation.

Second, it can never be guaranteed that a bird that has had a wing clip will be unable to fly when it is taken outside. Birds are so well adapted for flight that, when the conditions

are right, even a clipped bird may be capable of enough flight to escape. It is also possible that a bird that has been clipped has undergone (or is undergoing) a molt, unbeknownst to the owner, and has developed enough new feathers to be capable of flight. Because of the many instances in which bird owners have lost their clipped birds after taking them outside, some veterinary offices display a plaque warning (or a note on the invoice) to owners that a properly performed wing clip does not guarantee against flight in all situations.

Third, the severity of the wing clip should depend on the variety of bird. Some lighter, more aerodynamic birds will need a more severe wing clip than heavier bodied birds. For example, cockatiels require more clipping of flight feathers to restrict flight than do Amazon parrots and African greys. Cockatiels sometimes seem capable of flight even after all their flight feathers have been clipped!

Test-fly a bird after a wing clip if any uncertainty exists about the effectiveness of the clip. The ideal room for the test is one that is carpeted, has few obstacles, and can be closed up to prevent escape.

Fourth, if wings are clipped too severely, the bird may drop abruptly rather than having descending flight and may incur significant injury. Three common injury sites are the beak, the sternum, and the tail base. Splitting the skin over the sternum is an injury that often occurs in birds that are unable to ease descent and land on a hard, uncarpeted surface. The skin at this site is very thin and can easily be traumatized. Tail-base laceration may occur in birds such as cockatiels, especially young birds 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 of these injuries usually require surgical intervention and can be prevented by proper wing clipping.

As noted earlier, there are two basic types of wing clips with variations of each. The standard wing clip involves clipping the first 5 to 10 outer flight feathers (primaries) on both wings. The feathers are clipped just below the covert feathers, seen from a dorsal aspect (top side). The number of primary flight feathers trimmed depends on the type of bird and its flying ability.

A variation to the standard clip exists in which the feathers are clipped near their base, leaving only a short portion of the quill. The reasoning behind this clip is that it will not promote feather chewing of the wing fragment and is still aesthetic. A disadvantage to this clip is that the very short quills afford no protection to emerging blood feathers during a molt. Whichever method is used, care should be taken to make an even cut. Bird owners who see a jagged cut often think the job was done incorrectly, even though that may not be the case.

The other basic type of wing clip is the cosmetic clip. It is less effective at restricting flight and thus is less preferred by avian veterinarians. However, this type of clip is requested by some clients, since the clip, when properly done, is barely noticeable in

birds in normal resting position with wings folded. The standard clip, in contrast, is sometimes much more noticeable. The cosmetic clip is accomplished by leaving three or four of the outer primary flight feathers and clipping the remaining primaries as well as the secondary flight feathers if more flight restriction is desired. As with the standard clip, the covert feathers on the dorsal side of the wing are used as a guide for where to clip the feathers or the feathers are clipped near the base. The cosmetic clip is especially preferred by macaw owners, as it maintains the beauty of the birds' wings. However, because this clip is not very effective in restricting flight, birds that have had a cosmetic clip should not be taken outside. The risk for escape is simply too great.

When clipping the flight feathers, the groomer should be careful to avoid cutting blood feathers, the newly developing feathers that have blood in the shaft. These feathers will bleed if they are cut. The groomer should also avoid cutting all of the fully developed feathers around a blood feather, leaving it without support. There is a strong possibility that such unsupported blood feathers will break and bleed with even normal activity. Whenever a blood feather is present, the groomer should leave a fully developed feather on one side of it to provide support and should instruct the client to return to have the clip completed (usually for no charge) after the blood feather has fully developed.

Finally, because any short wing clip will make a bird more prone to breaking blood feathers as they emerge (since the blood feathers will not be protected by surrounding feathers), a longer clip should be used with birds that are prone to blood feather breakage.

Adapted from *Essentials of Avian Medicine: A Guide for Practitioners, Second Edition* by Peter S. Sakas, DVM, MS. Published by the American Animal Hospital Association Press. (2002)