Grooming Pet Birds: How To Clip Wings, Trim Beaks and Nails, and Bathe Your Bird

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Trimming beaks

Birds beaks normally wear down evenly. If the beak is not wearing evenly, an avian veterinarian should be contacted to examine the bird and determine the reason. The uneven beak should be trimmed to prevent problems with eating or preening.

Trimming nails

Overgrown nails will make perching difficult for a bird as well as increase the chance of catching a nail on carpet or sweaters. A good rule of thumb is that the nails are too long if the toe is elevated off the ground when the feet are placed on a flat surface. Even short nails may need to be blunted to remove sharp points.

There are two techniques for trimming nails. The first uses human nail clippers or dog nail clippers depending on the bird's size. Having a supply of styptic powder on hand will be helpful in case a nail is clipped too close and bleeds. With the bird restrained, trim the tip off the nail. More can always be removed, so start with small amounts with each clip. Some owners will trim only 1-2 nails a day and take a week to trim them all. This works well, as you are done before the bird realizes you trimmed his nails.

The second technique uses a rotary grinding device like a Dremel tool to grind the tip off the nail. It cauterizes as it shortens. A second person is needed to provide the restraint.

Having the nails trimmed by a veterinarian or bird groomer will give you an idea how short the nails should be kept. After the initial trim, you can continue to keep them that short with an every-other-week or every-month trim.

Clipping wings

Clipping wings is necessary for all of the more social birds that are allowed out of the cage. Birds such as canaries and other finches that stay in the cage do not need their wings clipped. Birds have been known to fly into windows, into pots of boiling water or other food, into ceiling fans, etc. We need to take the responsibility to protect them and this responsibility includes clipping wings.

Watch your veterinarian or bird groomer trim the wings the first time. A proper trim allows the bird to exercise its muscles and to coast to a landing if needed. It should prevent the bird from attaining additional altitude. Clipping wings is not without risk. If done incorrectly the bird will not have control of his flight and could injure himself. In addition, if a blood feather is accidentally cut, first aid procedures would need to be used to properly remove it and stop the bleeding.

If the bird does manage to escape to the outside world and fly off, immediately put his cage out in the yard with the door open and a big bowl of his favorite food in and on it. Hopefully, within a day or two, your feathered friend will decide the cage is not so bad after all. Let people know you lost your bird. Put up fliers, call veterinary clinics and animal shelters, and put an ad in the paper. Do not give up hope. Some birds are found and caught weeks after the escape. Keep up-to-date photos of the bird. Take pictures from both sides, front, and back. Write down the ID information whether it is from a leg band or a microchip. Having this information will help prove ownership if the need arises.

Showers, baths, misting

Most birds like to get wet and bathing often encourages normal preening behavior. Because our homes are kept at a constant temperature through central heat and air conditioning, the air in the house is dry compared to the bird's natural environment. Some birds prefer to be misted while others like bathing. A squirt bottle can be set on mist (not spray) and aimed up and over the bird so the water falls onto the bird like mist or rain. For birds that like bathing, a dish with an inch of water in it can be placed in the bottom of the cage. Remove it after the birds have bathed. For birds that prefer showers, place a perch in the shower and supervise them. Keep constant track of the temperature of the water, so the bird does not become too cold or possibly burned if the water temperature suddenly changes.

Some birds like daily wet-downs while others do fine on a weekly basis. Take your bird's lead in the matter. If the bird is not feeling well, skip the bath or misting until he is feeling better to avoid chilling or stressing him.

Some birds enjoy being "blow-dried," while others become fearful of the noise. If your bird likes being dried with a hair dryer, always use the low heat setting, do not let the dryer get too close to the bird, and constantly move the dryer so the heat is not focused on one area of the body for more than a second. Birds have suffered severe burns through the inappropriate use of hair dryers. Use extreme caution.

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