Broken Blood Feathers First Aid and Removal: What to Do When Your Bird Has Them

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

What are blood feathers?

Blood feathers, also called "pin feathers," are new feathers that are starting to grow. Since they are actively growing, they need a large blood supply and will bleed if broken, hence the name. Each blood feather grows from a special area in the skin called a follicle. The feather has an artery and vein that extend up into it from the follicle and nourish the feather. Due to the color of the blood supply, the shaft of a blood feather will appear dark, whereas the shaft of an older feather will be white. A blood feather has a larger quill (calamus) than a mature feather. A blood feather starts out with a waxy keratin sheath that protects it while it grows. When the feather is mature, the blood supply will recede and the waxy sheath will be removed by the bird.

Blood feathers appear during the moulting process as old feathers are lost and replaced by new ones. Wing and tail feathers, especially, are lost and replaced in a staggered manner during the moult so the bird will still be able to fly.

What should be done if a blood feather starts to bleed?

On occasion, a blood feather will break and start to bleed, or it may accidentally be cut when the wings are trimmed. In a healthy bird, a broken blood feather is usually not a life-threatening emergency if appropriate steps are taken. Even if the bleeding stops quickly, however, you may wish to have your bird examined by a veterinarian, and have the broken blood feather removed. Even if the blood has clotted, broken blood feathers are often removed so they cannot be reinjured and consequently bleed. If a broken blood feather is removed, a new one will start to grow.

If a blood feather is repeatedly injured, continues to bleed, or the bird has a medical condition, such as liver disease which can affect the clotting ability of the blood, a significant amount of blood may be lost. This is an emergency situation, and action must be taken quickly.

If there is bleeding from a blood feather:

1. Restrain the bird.
2. Apply pressure to the broken shaft with gauze or a cotton ball. Cornstarch can be applied with a cotton ball to help the blood to clot.
3. If the feather continues to bleed, it will need to be removed. If you have not done this before, it would be wise to call and talk to your veterinarian who can walk you through it. Removing the feather is best done using a tweezers (for a small bird), or a hemostat or needle-nosed pliers (for a larger bird). The feather should be gripped close to the skin and pulled steadily and firmly in the direction the feather is growing. Pulling out a feather will cause pain, so be sure you firmly, but carefully, hold the bird. If it is a wing feather, support and immobilize the wing to keep it steady during the procedure. Do not jerk on or twist the feather.
4. If bleeding occurs from the follicle after the feather has been removed, continue to apply pressure to the area for several minutes.
5. When the bleeding has stopped, return the bird to his cage, keep him quite, and monitor him for bleeding for an hour.
6. If the feather broke off below the skin line, the feather cannot be totally removed, or pressure has not stopped the bleeding, the bird should be immediately examined by a veterinarian.
7. Also consult your veterinarian immediately if your bird appears weak or there is excessive blood loss.

How can you be prepared?

Bird owners should be prepared and knowledgeable about how to manage a broken blood feather. A hemostat and cotton balls should be included in the bird's first aid kit. The next time your bird is in for a check-up or wing trim, have your veterinarian show you how to remove a blood feather. Being prepared for this emergency will make it easier for you and your bird, should a broken blood feather occur. If you trim your bird's wings, examine each feather closely before cutting, so a blood feather is not accidentally cut.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*