Bird Droppings: The Importance of Daily Observation in Early Identification of Problems

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Since birds are closer to the wild state than most other pets, and are often the prey of other animals, they are good at masking signs of illness. Unfortunately, this may delay diagnosis of problems, so bird owners must be creative in observing their bird's condition. One quick health indicator is a bird's droppings. Daily inspection of cage papers may be able to tell you if your bird is stressed or becoming ill, alerting you in timely fashion to the need for corrective care.

The digestive system of your bird is physically simple and efficient. From consumption to elimination, the digestive process takes less than a day; thus droppings can provide you with information you can correlate with recent meals, activities, or events. Become familiar with the appearance of your bird's normal droppings, and if something is amiss, you can quickly spot abnormalities and bring them to your veterinarian's attention.

Droppings have three components: feces, urine, and urates.

- Feces are the solid waste from the bird's digestive system.
- As in mammals, urine is produced by the kidneys.
- Avian kidneys also produce urates, which are concentrated uric acid (a waste product from the breakdown of proteins).

Feces, urine, and urates are all combined at the cloaca, the end of the bird's digestive, urinary, and reproductive tracts. The three waste products are usually evacuated together as one dropping. Changes in any one of the components can offer clues to your bird's condition.

Bird Droppings Should Be Inspected Daily for:

- Color
- Texture
- Moisture content
- Number

Droppings age quickly, though, and as they age, they intermingle, making them more difficult to inspect correctly.

What is normal?

The droppings of each species vary. Factors such as diet and age also come into play. Frequent elimination is normal – inspection of droppings over several days will define what is normal for your particular bird. Other characteristics of normal droppings are:

- Droppings should be odorless.
- Feces should be firm and dark brown or green in color, depending upon the species of bird and the diet. If the staple diet is seed, feces will be dark green; while if the staple diet is pelleted food, it will take on the color of the pellets. When feces dry, they often look black.
- Urine should be clear.
- Urates should be creamy-white, opaque, and almost chalky in appearance.

Budgerigars (parakeets) normally produce 35-50 droppings per day, while larger birds produce less. Nectar-feeding birds, such as lories and lorikeets, will have large numbers of more liquid droppings.

What is abnormal?

You need to be able to distinguish between a temporary change and, for example, a bout of diarrhea. Also, watch for changes in color, volume, consistency, and number of droppings.

Some abnormal signs include:

- Feces light in color, mustard yellow, rusty brown, or containing blood
- Unusually large feces or feces that are coarse-textured, watery, or mushy
- Feces that contain undigested food or have a foul odor
- Urine with any color at all
- Urates that are yellow or green
- Any significant increase or decrease in the number of droppings

To avoid misinterpreting signs, take your bird's recent meals into account. Blueberries or beets will significantly alter the color of feces. A diet high in moisture, such as fruits and vegetables, will increase urine output.

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Other signs of illness

If changes in droppings do occur, be on the lookout for other telltale signs of illness such as:

- Lethargy
- Not eating
- Sitting low or huddled, with or without ruffled feathers
- Rattled, wheezy, or open-mouth breathing

If your bird exhibits any of these symptoms, contact your avian veterinarian immediately. If you need to take your bird in for an exam, be sure to bring along the cage papers, so the veterinarian can examine the droppings, as well.

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