Evaluating Neglect, Abuse, Suffering, and Illness in Parrots and Other Captive Exotic Birds

Parrots and other exotic birds often suffer in ways not readily recognized as mistreatment or neglect. The following signs – both visible and not so visible – may indicate that the physical condition of the bird and the surrounding environment warrant further investigation or intervention.

Note: Items covered in this evaluation sheet do not reflect legal requirements.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Conspicuous Signs

- Housing too small to allow birds to move freely about, to hop, jump or fully extend their wings in all directions
- Overcrowding; birds unable to roost without physical contact or harassment from other birds
- Inappropriately sized perches, or no perches at all
- Perches, cage bars, and grates encrusted with feces, mold, and debris
- Rotting food or lack of food appropriate to the species
- Contaminated water, or no water at all
- Unsanitary cages; excessive moisture or dust; presence of insects, including maggots, flies, or roaches
- Exposure to toxic fumes, chemicals, or strong odors, or to lead or other hazardous materials
- Exposure to extreme temperatures, (below 60° F or above 85° F), rain or drafts; lack of shade from direct sunlight
- Lack of ventilation
- Live or dead rodents in or around cages
- Dead birds (these should be removed for necropsy)
- Excessively bright lighting; insufficient natural or artificial light

Less Conspicuous Signs

- Excessive confinement
  - Kept in cage 24/7
  - No access to out-of-cage exercise
  - Barren cage
  - No access to free flight in a safe area

- Lack of socialization
  - Isolated from like-species companionship
  - Kept alone without human contact
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THE BIRD

Signs of Discomfort, Stress, or Fear

- Repetitive, functionless behaviors: pacing, biting on cage bars, head bobbing, constant rocking back and forth, or walking in circles
- Excessive vocalization: screaming; repetitive chirps or alarm calls
- Unbroken silence
- Fear behaviors: cowering, crouching, trembling or lunging; thrashing against cage bars
- Apathy or excessive sleeping; lack of motion
- Attempts to retreat when approached by a casual observer
- Aggression towards people or other birds
- Hyperactivity and anxiety; hissing, panting; fanned tail, wings held away from body, or raised head feathers
- Injury, feather destruction, or self-mutilation

Signs of Neglect

- Overgrown beaks or nails
- Ragged, soiled, or missing feathers
- Dull or matted plumage; darkened “bars” on feathers
- Abrasions, calluses, ulcerations; broken or missing toenails; swollen joints
- Extensive feather loss, unhealed wounds, eye damage – all signs of long-term neglect
- Darkened bars on feathers, often a sign of malnutrition or prolonged stress

This checklist is intended as a quick guide to aid humane and law enforcement officials in evaluating conditions that may contribute to the mistreatment of captive exotic birds, and to help facilitate inspections and corrective action. NOTE: Items covered in this evaluation sheet do not necessarily reflect legal requirements. Anti-cruelty, pet shop, and other laws governing captive exotic birds vary among states. Consult with local authorities to determine what federal or state laws may apply.
Birds experiencing any of the following conditions, or any combination of these symptoms, require immediate medical attention.

**Feather Abnormalities: Plucking vs. Mutilating**

In general, the bird should be alert, vocal, active, responsive to stimuli, and interested in the surrounding environment. They should be able to perch steadily, preen themselves, and exhibit a healthy appetite. If there are no other overt signs of illness, an open wound that is the result of feather plucking or self-mutilating. These birds should receive immediate medical attention.

- **Feather plucking and shredding**, dull or matted plumage, ragged wing or tail feathers, dark stress bars, and generally poor feather quality are often caused by factors such as:
  - Allergies; bacterial, viral infection or protozoal infection (Giardia)
  - Paresis from heavy metal poisoning
  - Excessive confinement in too small a cage
  - Nutritional deficiencies: insufficient food, diets lacking in essential nutrients
  - Developmental factors: chicks deprived of physical contact with parents, too early or forced weaning, juvenile did not fledge,
  - Psychological factors: boredom, lack of exercise and mental stimulation, stress, separation anxiety, or lack of socialization
  - Low humidity or infrequent bathing, airborne toxins
  - Breeding; hormonal imbalance

**Feathers**

- Feathers are smooth & glossy with an iridescent sheen in some species. Colors are rich and vibrant and feathers free of ragged edges, stress bars, or discolorations. Species such as a
- **Healthy Plumage**
  - Healthy plumage: Feathers are smooth & glossy with an iridescent sheen in some species. Colors are rich and vibrant and feathers free of ragged edges, stress bars, or discolorations.

**Unhealthy Plumage**

- Lethargy; extreme physical weakness
- Fluffed-up feathers; shivering
- Vomiting, or gagging to expel
- Bleeding, skin lacerations, swelling, or masses
- Lameness or dragging a wing or a leg
- Inability to perch or walk
- Bloody, bright green, or extremely watery or formless feces; yellow, rusty brown, tarry black, or malodorous
- Protruding bones
- Lying prone at the bottom of cage or enclosure; grasping on cage bars to maintain balance
- Distended or bloated abdomen

**Signs of Illness or Injury**

Use this list to check off and keep track of any conditions the bird may have.

- Respiratory distress: difficulty breathing, gasping, or excessive wheezing or sneezing; prolonged open-mouth breathing with tail flicks accompanying each breath
- Discharge, redness, or inflammation around nasal area, eyes, or mouth
- Protrusions or wet or soiled feathers around bird’s bottom
- Injuries: open wounds, sores; animal bites
- Excessive scratching, irritated red skin, scaly lesions, or missing feather patches (possible sign of lice or mites)
- Lethargy; extreme physical weakness
- Fluffed-up feathers; shivering
- Vomiting, or gagging to expel
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