This information herein is intended solely for use by animal shelter and care facilities to accommodate the short-term care and housing needs of captive birds in a shelter setting; not recommended for long-term care. The above guidelines are specific to birds kept as "pets" and surrendered to shelters. For medical care relating to wild birds, consult with a licensed wildlife rehabilitation organization. These materials are made possible through a generous grant from the ASPCA.

Birds often arrive in sheltering facilities with physical or behavioral conditions that require remedy but are not necessarily signs that a bird is diseased or ill or has a life-threatening condition. Most are the result of poor care, inadequate diet, previous injury or trauma, and lack of proper grooming. The most common are dull or matted plumage, bald spots, missing toes or toenails, and overgrown beaks and nails. Birds are prey species, and their instinct is to hide illness. Examination by a qualified avian veterinarian to determine the underlying cause and to ascertain if the signs are an early indication of a more serious illness is always recommended.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR
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 (i.e. bleeding, lesions, discharge from the eyes or nostrils, respiratory distress, swelling, dragging a wing or leg, lethargy, or fluffed and lying prone on the cage floor), chances are the bird is otherwise in good health.

FEATHER ABNORMALITIES: PLUCKING VS. MUTILATING
The origins of feather destruction behaviors are complex; they can be medical, psychological, environmental or a combination thereof. Some birds simply over preen or shred their feathers, others pluck out some or all of the feathers within their reach, while others graduate to the most serious self-mutilating of their skin and underlying tissue. For shelters, the most serious concern is a bird with 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:

- Nutritional deficiencies: insufficient food, diets lacking in essential nutrients
- Psychological factors: boredom, lack of exercise and mental stimulation, stress, separation anxiety, or lack of socialization with humans and/or other birds
- Excessive confinement in too small a cage
- Allergies; bacterial, viral infection or protozoal infection (Giardia)
- Low humidity or infrequent bathing, airborne toxins
- Developmental factors: chicks deprived of physical contact with parents, too early or forced weaning, juvenile did not fledge, insufficient social interaction with parents, siblings & flock
- Breeding; hormonal imbalance

Some conditions can be mitigated through improved diet or medical intervention. Boredom or lack of physical or mental stimulation is often a cause. Providing the bird with an increased variety of enrichment activities may help to reduce feather plucking. Repeated feather plucking over a long period often results in permanent damage to the feather follicle and prevents feathers from growing back.

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 Cockatoos, African Greys, and Cockatiels emit a powdery down. Generally dull and pale, and/or has ragged edges, black areas and stress marks.

Healthy Plumage
Unhealthy Plumage
Photo: MAARS
Photo: MAARS

MORE BEAUTIFUL WILD

Photo: Anja Denker

CELEBRATE NATIONAL BIRD DAY
avianwelfare.org/nationalbirdday