



PBA Newsletter

“preserving birds through aviculture”

President's Message Summer/Fall 2008

Most of the members of this organization breed Pyrrhuras, and most also have some pet conures. We have included the ASA President's Message from Steve Duncan (page 7) in this newsletter because it is very relevant to what's going on today in the U.S. I am familiar with both of the cases Steve mentions (as well as others), and we should be very concerned about these events. They seem to be indicative of the trend enabled by the “animal rights fanatics” propaganda that makes it “politically correct” and acceptable to go after breeders or even multiple pet owners. Much of the animal-related legislation at municipal and state levels gives animal control and other related authorities way too much power to persecute animal owners, with little regard for the morality or constitutionality of the law.



Photo courtesy of Joi West

EVERYONE should belong to the national Pet-Law list and to their state Pet-Law list and familiarize themselves with the information, articles, and instructions on dealing with animal issues at various sites (including ASA, NAIA, and national Pet-Law). It is disturbing to think we have to be ready to defend ourselves when we are doing *nothing basically wrong* in our animal keeping. Certainly, there will be some differences in husbandry techniques, but there should be NO EXCUSE for seizing animals that are not in danger of dying or are not being kept in substandard conditions. What's happening with birds and with other animals (dogs, horses, in particular), is that reasons are trumped up to basically steal healthy animals under color of law. No one condones animal abuse/cruelty/neglect, but it should be obvious—not a single underweight animal in a group, poop in one cage, or water bowl soup in another, or even a *plucked* bird—which has been used as an excuse to seize all the birds.

It is extremely important that animal owners/breeders develop their network of fellow travelers in this animal-owning country, and that we all stick together.

continued on page 3...

Getting Started With Recall Training

By Darren,

Source: <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/Parrotrecalltraining>

First and foremost I do want to mention that I have only worked with handfed baby birds that were hatched from breeders here in the U.S., and were 4 or 6 months old when I began. But, I understand these are the same steps to take with birds that are of any age.

What steps I took were:

1. Develop a great relationship with the bird. I used my hand to hold food for them, with Marco for about 14 days and Polo for 6 days. (I continued with Marco for 30 days total, in order to get him to FLY TO ME while inside, but again, this is for RECALL training ... and outdoors is a WHOLE NEW ball game). They would literally sit by me and eat out of my hand. I would let them sit where they want and just let them eat out of my hand. I didn't even try to touch or pet them, which reinforced trust. I let them come to ME. But, if anyone has had a hungry parrot that can fly, they know when you eat there they are. RIGHT next to you or on you, and in most cases, just preparing the food is enough to get some loud screams and their attention.

2. I was able to touch/pet the bird and they loved being "on/with" me. Again, both birds were 4 or 6 months old when I got them.

3. I then started with little steps. I'd put them on a perch stand about 8 inches long and 4 inches high on a table. I took them OUT of their cage area. I find birds have a greater attention on me, when not near their cage and especially it helps to be in a different room. Door closed with no distractions.

4. I would put my hand to the breast and confidently say UP and get them to step up and then, with great enthusiasm a GOOD BOY and "click" and treat. I use a clicker for training. You can get them at most pet stores, Petco and Petsmart I believe. It's important you use the clicker properly. EXACTLY at the moment they do the desired action you IMMEDIATELY click, and reward. They need to learn the click is a bridge to a reward.

5. Once I got them to step up, then I would do this for 3 or 4 days and only for 15 minute sessions. It should be FUN for the birds and NOT perceived as a negative by them.

Lisa and CB baby



Lisa and YSGC



Rosifrons youngsters

Photos courtesy of Marcy Covault

Now, again, both my birds were VERY friendly and I used the step up, which they knew already to teach them that the “click” sound meant GREAT JOB and REWARD. :)

So, to start, they need to learn that their behavior, or your desired behavior you are asking, gets a reward. This is VERY important.



Photo courtesy of Joi West

A clicker helps so much, I think, as it is a bridge, and you have a tiny window to get them the treat. So, if you don't have the treat ready, which I suggest you do, it'll give you a second to get it. The waiting for the reward is better AFTER they have learned why they got it. Someone told me to practice the clicker with a quarter. Drop a quarter and at the exact moment it hits the ground click at the same time ...after a 20-minute practice session you'll be much better at it. But, the clicker sound should be at the EXACT moment they do the desired action. Ex: If you are training recall, you do not click when they take off and fly, you click the SECOND they touch your hand for landing. As, THAT is the desired goal. ☒

LEARN MORE:

<http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/Parrotrecalltraining/join>



Photo courtesy of Marcy Covault

Continued from page one

The ARFs are way too successful at “moving the middle” and “divide and conquer” in tactics and laws, and the only way we are going to be able to keep raising and enjoying our birds, as well as sharing them with others, is to support each other in this battle—and it truly is a battle against extremists who have recruited well-meaning people and brainwashed them into often unknowingly supporting the AR agenda. I fervently hope that none of us has to deal with the nightmare of being targeted by AR “crazies” or opportunistic thieves. I also hope that when we find out about one of these events, if we can determine that it's a wrongful seizure (despite the media, which likes to burn animal owners at the stake without a trial), we help the wronged owners as much as we are able.

On a more positive note, we welcome input for our newsletter from members, e.g., pictures of youngsters with a paragraph or two about them or about their new owners, as well as special breeding successes with Pyrrhuras. I hope all members will share their successes! We need assistance from members to make this newsletter the best it can be.

We are also approaching officer elections for the coming year and we need “fresh faces” from our membership to carry on. If you are interested in serving on the officer nominating committee or in an officer position, let one of us know ASAP. ☒

Marcy Covault, President

President: Marcy Covault
birdcompanions@onlineok.com

Vice President: Joi West
wildwest@nwi.net

Secretary: Chris Kraum
kraum@sbcglobal.net

Treasurer: June DiCiocco
jdicciocco@mindspring.com



Psittacine Beak & Feather Disease (PBF D)

by Joi West

This is a new series of articles on the various diseases that parrots are affected by.

This deadly and devastating viral disease is perhaps one of the scariest diseases avian enthusiasts might have to deal with. The infected bird initially may not even show any symptoms. Visual symptoms are characterized by feather abnormalities, feather dystrophy, and ultimately death. It can affect birds of any age, but is seen more in young birds between 0-3 years of age. This is a highly contagious disease and a bird that has appeared normal may suddenly show symptoms and a positive test result.

How Does This Happen?

PBF D is caused by a DNA virus that attacks the immune system and those that produce the beak and feathers. This is why affected birds commonly develop secondary infections so easily. Some birds that are exposed to the virus develop a mild infection and recover, but the majority develops the “full blown” disease and do not recover. The virus is one of the smallest, a circovirus, which is known to cause disease.

The virus is airborne, carried in dried feces and feather dust, and can easily adhere to clothing toys, feeding equipment and dishes, transport cages/carriers, pretty much anything! It is thought to be transmitted by ingestion and/or inhalation and possibly passed on from the hen to the egg.

What kinds of parrots are susceptible? PBF D has been diagnosed in more than 40 Psittacine species. The species

What's true and what's not?

While Cockatoos and African Greys get PBF D more commonly, that doesn't mean an Amazon can't be infected. Any Psittacine species can contract PBF D.

A healthy appearing bird may still carry the disease! Just because your parrot looks healthy, doesn't mean it doesn't have PBF D. The best way to tell is have the bird tested by an avian vet.

“PBF D isn't as common as it used to be.” This is not true. While PBF D has been around for a long time, it hasn't been eradicated. There are likely more infected birds than are reported now because most people don't test a healthy looking bird.



Three birds each in different stages of the disease.

Photo courtesy of www.theparrotsocietyuk.org
Used with permission

the disease is more often seen in are cockatoos, Eclectus, lovebirds, budgies, and African grey parrots. South American parrots have been found to be susceptible, but are infected less often.

Symptoms

There are both acute and chronic forms of PBF D.

In the *acute form*, one of the most recognized symptoms of PBF D is feather dystrophy. Feather dystrophy is when the feather grows in, the development is abnormal. The feather(s) may appear twisted and/or misshaped, ragged, and lack the normal shine and color of healthy, new feather. Bald patches are another tell-tale sign that a bird might have PBF D, especially on the head where a bird that self-mutilates their feathers can't reach them (unless the bird has a mate). This is one of the more confusing to people with birds that self-mutilate their feathers. Missing body feathers are more likely a cause of self-mutilation than PBF D, but when bringing a new bird home that has missing feathers, even on the body, it's wise to have the bird tested for PBF D. The beak will also appear shiny on birds that naturally produce powder, especially in Cockatoos, and African Grey parrots. Beaks will also over grow and eventually the beak will develop abnormalities.

Birds that are infected with PBF D will eventually lose most, if not all, of their feathers. This usually indicates advanced disease. Ultimately the bird will die a painful death, usually from a secondary infection or organ failure.

Other symptoms in the acute phase are depression, regurgitation and diarrhea, loss of appetite and weight, and death.

In the *chronic form*, the powder-down feathers are most often affected first. Feathers may break easily, be discolored, deformed, and/or curled. Once the follicle is damaged, the feather cannot

be replaced and bare skin is exposed. The beak may develop irregularities, discolorations, appear overgrown, deformed, and even fracture. Secondary infections are common. Dropping composition and color may change due to liver involvement and liver failure would cause death.

The biggest difference between the acute form and chronic form is the acute form most often affects young birds and the chronic form affects older birds.

The Carrier

Some birds will show no symptoms and will appear normal and healthy. These birds are called carriers of the disease where the virus is dormant. It's even possible they would test negative initially, even for months, until they experience a stressful situation (transporting/shipping, an injury, etc) when they test positive for PBFD. Stress can cause the disease to become active.

Diagnosis and Testing

Diagnosing a bird includes taking a detailed and accurate medical history, clinical symptoms, physical exam, biopsies with microscopic examination, and a DNA PCR blood test.

The best time to test a bird is during or following a stressful event, such as shipping, or after possible exposure to an infected bird. If the bird tests negative, it should be retested in 4 weeks. If the result is negative again, the test should be repeated in 60-90 days, and possibly yearly. Since the disease has incubation period as short as 4 weeks, or as long as several years, it may take awhile to show up. The test is best if performed by an experienced avian vet. A blood sample is taken from a vein in the neck, not taken from a toenail, which can be a soiled with feces or food. Fees vary, so you should consult with your avian vet on costs for the testing.

What Can Be Done?

Recently better testing procedures have been developed. Tests to determine whether a bird is immune to PBFD or susceptible to it have been developed. A vaccine has been developed which protects the inoculated bird from infection by the virus. Two injections, 4-6 weeks apart, must be given. The vaccine is not 100% yet, but research and testing is still being done.

There is no specific treatment for PBFD. High quality nutrition, additional heat, keeping the beak trimmed, and treating secondary infections is recommended. Most birds succumb to the disease within 2 years of developing the disease. ☒



A Cockatoo and African Grey



Above photos courtesy of www.theparrotsocietyuk.org Used with permission



The same English Budgie as PBFD progresses through each stage.



Photos courtesy of www.birds-online.de Used with permission.

Europe Bullish on AR

<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/world/5769191.html>

Europe gets bullish on animal rights issues; Activists across continent celebrate passage of several laws, including one protecting bulls

By SHELLEY EMLING

Cox News Service
May 10, 2008



A GLOBAL TREND?

Animal activism around the world:

- ✦ In Britain, hunting with dogs was banned in 2005. Under the legislation, dogs can still be used to follow a scent but cannot be used to kill the fox.
- ✦ Beijing 's many restaurants selling dog meat will close as part of the city's effort to change its image before the Olympic Games.
- ✦ Many U.S. states, including Texas, have put restrictions in place on turtle exports despite a booming Asian market for turtle meat.
- ✦ Israel has banned the production of foie gras, and California will end the sale and production of foie gras by 2012.
- ✦ In Italy, animals cannot be used on TV in any way that goes against their nature or subjects them to stress.
- ✦ Scotland has banned the sale of animals to people under 16 years old and banned animals as prizes.
- ✦ Hungary has recently joined Austria, Singapore, and Croatia in prohibiting wild animal circus acts.
- ✦ LONDON — Spain's iconic sport, bullfighting, is known for its ferocity and flair. But the centuries-old spectacle may have met its match in an equally tenacious opponent: Europe's animal rights movement. ☒

(more at web site)



Avicultural Society of America (ASA) President's Message

Steve Duncan, July/Aug 2008

Many of you have bred or kept birds for years without problems. Now imagine a scenario where you are out of town and you've enlisted the help of a friend to care for your birds on a daily basis while you are away. You return home to find your birds gone, not because of theft, but because the local Animal Control agency was called on a complaint from a neighbor who you don't get along with. No warrant is issued, but the agent decided the birds are not being cared for properly. To make matters worse, you are then arrested and charged with animal cruelty simply because you keep multiple birds in the house, or worse, you breed birds. If that's not bad enough, your teenage daughter is taken away to Child Protective Services because you have birds in the house – the conditions are perfectly sanitary, but it is just the fact that there are multiple birds in the house, and that is seen as a danger to the teenage child.

Imagine a different scenario where you keep your birds outside in well-maintained large flight cages. Due to family health problems, you run into temporary financial problems and get behind in your mortgage payments. You are forced to move so you temporarily transfer your birds to your friend's property next door until you can get settled into a new place. The new property owner complains that you abandoned the birds even though they are not on the property, but are housed next door and are well cared for on a daily basis. Animal Control comes and confiscates the birds without a warrant and hands them over to a private sanctuary until a court hearing can determine their fate. The sanctuary uses this opportunity to publicize the case to garner donations despite the fact that the county Animal Control is paying for them for the birds' care already. Meanwhile, you are charged with animal cruelty and now must defend yourself and your property rights to your birds at a time when you have no financial resources to do so.

These are tragic scenarios that may sound far-fetched or unlikely to happen, but both are recent factual cases. These short summaries may sound one-sided. Surely



Blue Fronted Amazon, Max



Sun Conure, Soleil



Rainbow Lorikeet, Roo



Brown Headed Parrot, Jordy



Green Cheeked Conure, Claire

Photos courtesy of Joi West

there must be more to each story, but the details of these cases actually get much worse when the entire story is told.

In the first case, the bird owner ultimately prevailed in court and was awarded damages, but the bird collection was destroyed in the time it took to fight the case. The legal costs were too great to allow her to rebuild her bird collection in the end so she no longer keeps and enjoys birds. The second case is ongoing at the time of writing this President's message, but the outlook is grim despite their innocence. .

Legally, animals are personal property, and as such, their possession should be protected from unjust search and seizure. There are certainly cases where Animal Control Agents should have the authority to remove animals that are in imminent danger of significant harm or of losing their lives, BUT it is becoming increasingly common for animals to be removed when they are in no imminent danger at all. Most often, the decision to remove birds is based upon the number of birds rather than the quality of care they are receiving.

Bird owners who are victims of this trend are faced with high legal costs and criminal charges that force them to give up their birds in order to drop the criminal charges. This is a trend that every bird owner and animal owner should be very angry about.

I wish I had the answer to easily fix this problem, but it is a trend that has been growing over many years as cultural values shift away from traditional rural lifestyles. The avicultural community must do a better job of educating the public about what we do and how birds should be kept. Avicultural organizations must also start working together more effectively on protecting our right to keep and breed birds.

On a brighter note, I am happy to welcome 2 new national affiliate organizations to ASA: The National Finch and Softbill Society and the American Dove Association. Both organizations are comprised of dedicated aviculturists. I look forward to working with the leadership of these organizations to help reverse the trends illustrated above that threaten our ability to continue the practice of aviculture. ☒

Protecting Your Right To Keep And Breed Birds And Animals

By Laurella Desborough

First, it is important to know the difference between animal welfare and animal rights, because the issue most often brought to legislators in the form of a law, is animal welfare, but underlying it, is the animal rights agenda of control, restriction and eventual elimination of all human/animal contact, even contact with pet animals.

Animal welfare is concerned about the well being, good health, and proper care of the animal. Animal rights is concerned with establishing legal means of controlling and restricting animal ownership. Proposed AR laws will use the word "human" but that is not necessarily the true representation of the law. When the animal rights organizations learned that they could not manage to get major legislation passed into laws to gain outright control over animal ownership, they determined that they would work at their agenda in incremental ways, so that, little by little, they would pass laws that would eventually arrive at total control over animal owners and their animals. These laws are presented to legislators as "human" or "welfare" laws. Our legislators have a great deal of material to review and unless they happen to be involved with some area of the animal owner community, they will not be able to know the difference between a welfare law and an AR law.

This presents a wonderful opportunity for each one of us to help educate our lawmakers about our bird or animal interest and the importance of preserving the activities associated with keeping and breeding of birds and animals. Legislators are especially good at listening to those who vote them into office, their constituents. This gives each one of you more power than the animal rights lobbyists. But, you have to use that power by communicating with your district representative and state senator. You can communicate by e-mail, by phone call, by letter or fax, or by a visit to the district office of your legislators. Using any or all of these methods will make a difference.

When communicating with your legislator, make sure that you put forward your best foot, and your best behavior. Be polite. This is extremely important. Many legislators are truly good citizens trying to do their duty and taking care of the public's work for low pay and lots of pressure. A polite presentation allows the legislator to really hear your concerns and focus on those concerns. When you are rude and/or argumentative, you turn off the ability of the legislator to hear you and certainly do not persuade him or her to take actions in your best interest. Remember that legislators may sponsor a bill but not understand that it can have a very negative effect on animals and owners.

Let your legislator know the role that



Photos courtesy of Joi West

birds or animals play in your life: a worthwhile hobby, extra income for retirees, wholesome activity for kids, educational activity for 4-Hers, full time commercial business with the tax benefit going to the state, etc. Let your legislator know how these restrictive animal laws will affect you and others, whether kids, pet owners, the general public, and the birds and animals.

For instance, requiring an annual vet exam for every bird, think finches here, or budgies, or the disturbance of an inspection when female birds are sitting on eggs or chicks. With some birds that means mate trauma, broken eggs or damaged chicks. Legislators think dogs and cats when they think pets. They do not have any idea of the husbandry and management required for birds. One of their common concerns is disease: psittacosis or avian flu. However, psittacosis is of such low concern in the US that it is not a major issue re exotic birds, but more of an issue for poultry farm workers, as is avian flu which is common to poultry farms, not to exotic bird farms. Also, let your legislator know that there is a large number of animal rights organizations that are working to change the laws in the United States, not for the welfare or betterment of the birds and animals, but to gain more control over them and their owners, to put restrictions on all aspects of animal ownership. Most people have heard of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, but many do not know that the Humane Society of the United States, HSUS, spends the majority of their efforts and funding to push for restrictive legislation on animal owners, animal transportation, and animal breeding. Nor do they know that the HSUS does NOT fund

Reputable Breeders Policy Change

by Terry Thistlethwaite,
used with permission

This is what it's coming to---
for all pet animal breeders...

Attention:

Our policy of inviting potential new owners into our home to see our puppies or kittens has been changed as a result of the Animal Rights anti-pet activity in our community. Animal Rights is a movement led by PETA and the HSUS subversively dedicated to the eradication of all domestic animals, and particularly aimed at the most staunch animal lovers in our society - dedicated and reputable breeders of well bred, purebred dogs and cats.

Because of intimidation tactics, harassment, and outright (and wholly illegal) raids on reputable breeders and law abiding citizens by misguided disciples of these terrorist affiliated groups, we have reluctantly found it necessary to institute a policy of meeting with and interviewing potential new owners at locations other than our homes, lest our homes be made vulnerable to attack at a later date.

We are very sorry that our society has degenerated to the point that these subversive groups have forced us to make this change. We, of course, still stand behind our breeding program one hundred percent, and are most ready to supply you with references from our veterinarian, owners of pets from previous litters, show judges who have evaluated our animals, and the obvious superior health and condition of the animals themselves.

We thank you for your interest, for your love of our chosen breed, and for your support for all those who seek to protect and promote well bred, purebred dogs and cats.

any spay/neuter clinics in the US, nor provide funding for any shelters. Nor do they know that the HSUS is not a part of the local humane societies and does not fund them in any way. However, the HSUS does fund various animal rights lawsuits, federal animal rights legislation, and assists state legislators in drafting animal legislation. Recently HSUS and Fund for Animals joined forces and have hired an entire law firm to work on animal rights laws. ☒

Websites with information on animal rights:

www.americananimalwelfare.com

www.animalscam.com

www.animalwelfarecouncil.org



Photos courtesy of Joi West

SHIPPING BIRDS

Posted by Jean Pattison on ASABirds

[reprinted with permission]

Note: Some of this may be outdated, and with the reduction in available flights, as well as the outsourcing of reservationists, this may not all be possible! For example, not shipping birds into bigger airport to connect is almost impossible to do. However, there are lots of good suggestions and items to think about that most inexperienced shippers wouldn't consider. -MC

The Groundwork

Since 9/11 shipping birds has become more difficult. There are very few non-stop flights now. All major airlines have their own shipping rules and they need to be called to find out the latest regulations regarding shipping. Continental and Delta seem to be the most dependable airlines for shipping.

1. Call all the major airlines. The internet is a great resource for finding the right flight schedules prior to calling the airlines. It is a start, although some flights listed may not carry animals.
2. If you can, find the number to your local cargo, they are the most helpful. If at all possible go talk to them in person. They can give you all kinds of help the person at the 800 number doesn't know about.
3. Find out the different options available, freight, counter to counter, over night express and what the different insurance rates for each are.
4. When talking to the airlines know that direct is not the same as non-stop and find out all those options. There is non-stop (goes from point A to point B without stopping), direct (stops but doesn't change planes), and the last is connecting (changing planes).
5. Ask your cargo people which they think is the best connection (which airport has the best facilities) for an animal. It may be the longer way around but safer. Ask about a cool/warm room for animals.

6. Never ship into the bigger airports to connect, if at all possible.

7. Never ship a bird when the connection is the last one of the day. If the connection is missed then the bird will have to wait until the following day to get a flight out.

8. Try not to ship on weekends, if possible. The weekend crews are often part time. I have shipped many times on the weekends with no problems.

9. Don't ship on Mondays, a lot of fish and other commercial livestock is shipped on Mondays.

10. Don't ship on Fridays, those are big traveling days. So Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are the best shipping days.

11. Check on health certificate requirements in the state in which the bird is traveling to. Check the regulations at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/vs/sregs/> also, it would be wise to call the number listed for the most current requirements. Some states may also have regulations concerning birds LEAVING their state. DO NOT depend on others (especially the airlines) to tell you whether you need certificates or not.

The Shipping Container

1. Wooden crates work real well. Also the dog and cat "Kennel Cabs". The big chain stores have them very inexpensively.

2. If it is a grown bird with a powerful beak reinforce the air holes with wire.

3. A 2x2 screwed to the bottom floor works for a perch. A perch needs to be close to the floor but not so close a wing, head, or leg can become caught and injured. So on the floor is a good option.

4. If it's cold, you may want to tape the airholes closed for about 3/4 of the way up. You can also tape cardboard over half the door opening. A grown healthy bird can generate a LOT of heat so be sensible.

5. If the container has the wire door with food cup, put apples, oranges, or grapes in that for moisture, but you should have a cup on the door in case the bird misses a connection or flight, and needs water supplemented with out opening the container.

6. Drill holes in the crate so you can put zip ties around the door edges, and even thru the lip where the container screws together. Birds have been known to be stolen.

Packing the bird

1. Fill the container with enough food to last 3 days. This you can put directly on the floor as bedding. We're talking seeds and pellets here, not "wet" veggies. Apples, orange slices as well as grapes should be added to replace the water.

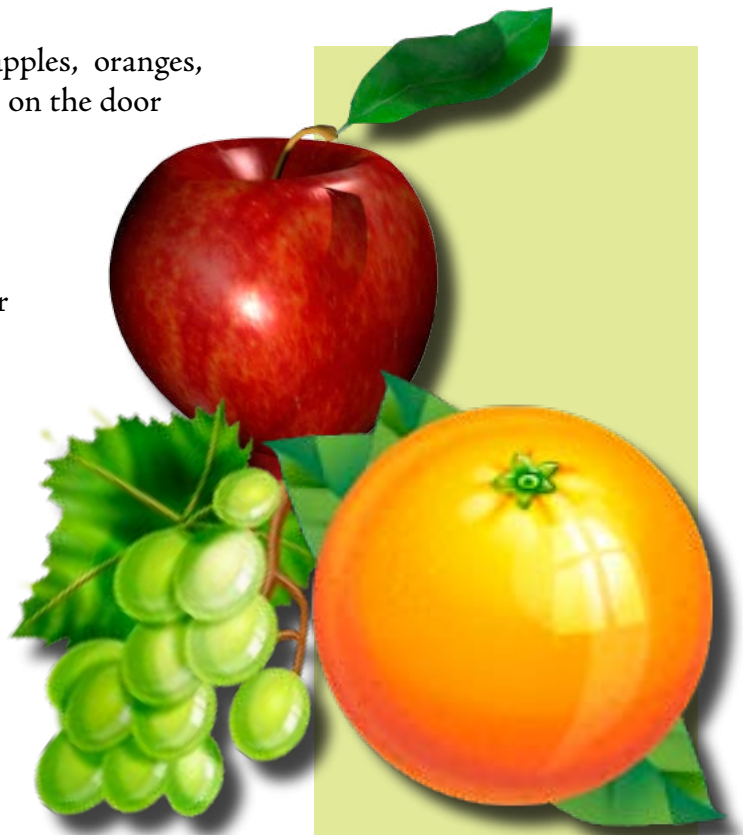
2. Find out the call letters of the destination airport. O'hare (Chicago) is ORD for example. This should be on the container in big red letters. Or make your own label and tape to crate.

3. Live bird should be printed on all sides of the container. Use big permanent marker, RED is nice. You don't care what the container looks like, it's the bird that's important.

4. A note should be on the container stating: Please notify (your phone number) if bird misses flight, or connection. You are the shipper and have done the leg-work so you can track it easier.

5. Have a container that water can be added to in case it becomes necessary. It should be on the wire door so crew people can pour it in without opening the doors, or having to wrestle with the container in any way.

6. Don't depend on the airlines to do any of your (or theirs either) work. Either you or the buyer should call the airport where they are due to arrive, and have the airlines check the airbill number to SEE if they made the connecting flight. This usually works best about 1/2 hour after they are in the air. ☒



Cause Of Bird Beak Deformity Stumps Scientists

COLLEEN HANDEL / USGS
Alaska Science Center



The black-capped chickadee is the bird most affected by "long-billed syndrome."

<http://www.adn.com/front/story/368008.html>

'LONG-BILLED SYNDROME':
Most of the affected species are found in Alaska, the Northwest.

BY ROBERT McCLURE
Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Published: April 7, 2008 12:42 AM
Last Modified:
April 7, 2008 01:23 AM

SEATTLE -- In his backyard in Seattle, Nikos Anton spotted a house sparrow that seemed to be toting a twig in its beak. But when he looked a little closer, Anton saw the "stick" was actually the grotesquely misshapen and overgrown top half of the bird's beak.

"It's like an elephant trunk.," he said, pointing to his pictures of

the bird. "It's a very odd thing happening here in Seattle."

But it's not just here.

This "long-billed syndrome" has been recorded in about 160 birds, mostly in western Washington and southern British Columbia and mostly since 2000. It's also documented in more than 2,100 birds in Alaska, where the deformity seems to have started affecting lots of birds in the early 1990s.

Researchers say the weird beaks appear to be concentrated in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, although reports are coming in from farther south -- from Southern California in one recent case.

The cause remains a mystery. A small band of puzzled, poorly funded scientists is scrambling to find answers. Could it be chemicals? Something genetic? A disease? Maybe a combination? Could it affect humans?

Whatever the cause, researchers are left profoundly unsettled by the mysterious "long-billed syndrome."

"It's really tragic," said Bud Anderson of the Falcon Research Group, based in Skagit County, Wash. "It's grotesque. It's horrible. It makes me want to puke."

BAD BEAKS LEAD TO HUNGER, DEATH

Researchers are asking the public to report sightings of any such birds so they can get a better feel for the extent of the phenomenon.

When affected birds are brought into wildlife-rehabilitation centers, their feathers often are dirty and matted, because a misshapen beak inhibits preening. For the same reason, they often are infested with feather lice.

And sometimes they're starving. Birds need to eat a lot every day, and they use their beaks much as we would use our hands. So what rehab centers are often left with is a dirty, cold, hungry and miserable bird. Many die.

"Who knows how many have died out in the field?" Anderson said.

When Anderson first noticed long-billed birds in Western Washington in the late 1990s, the deformities were more pronounced, he said. Now, it looks like more birds are affected, but not quite as badly.

In Alaska, the majority of birds affected are black-capped chickadees. But the syndrome has been seen in at least 28 other species there, including starlings, Steller's jays, magpies, robins and sparrows.

Most affected birds in western Washington are red-tailed hawks. Second on the list are crows. Others include the sparrow, black-capped chickadees, Steller jays, northern flickers and a raven. Also involved are a variety of songbirds, including woodpeckers, wrens and seabirds, including gulls and one common murre.

Birds' beaks are made of keratin, similar to human fingernails and hair. Normally, beaks wear down with use, continuing to grow at the same time. There's a balance. But something is causing this super-fast growth -- and it doesn't get turned off.

EXPLORING THE CHEMICAL LINK

In Alaska, where the phenomenon is best studied, birds can go from normal to long-beaked in as little as a month. Sometimes the misshapen beaks break off, but they grow back right away.

Researchers wonder: Why just the beaks? Why not the birds' toenails, which also are made of keratin?

So far, there is no evidence the deformities are caused by disease -- including infections, bacteria and viruses -- or parasites. But researchers are pursuing those ideas, as well as chemicals.

Beak deformities have been seen in individual birds here and there for a long time. In fact, Anderson found an ivory-billed woodpecker shot and stuffed in Cuba in 1843, now residing in an Atlanta museum, that had the longest such beak ever seen -- about 18 inches long, the "first and the worst" case, Anderson said.

And when researchers last year asked bird watchers to keep an

Whatever
the cause,
researchers
are left
profoundly
unsettled
by the
mysterious
"long-billed
syndrome."

eye out across North America, they got a handful of reports. “We are picking up birds across the rest of the continent, but nothing like the magnitude we’ve seen here,” said Colleen Handel, a U.S. Geological Survey biologist heading up the studies in Alaska. Now, “It looks like the entire (Northwest) Pacific Coast is being affected.”

Research has shown scientists that:

- ✦ A study of black-capped chickadees in Alaska showed “significantly higher” concentrations of a pesticide breakdown product, heptachlor epoxide, in adults with beak deformities than in normal adults. The same goes for a form of polychlorinated biphenyl, PCB, an industrial chemical.
- ✦ Baby birds from deformed parents in Alaska had higher concentrations of two of the most toxic forms of PCBs.
- ✦ Beak deformities were a feature of a syndrome that affected birds in the Great Lakes area in the 1970s that was associated with exposure to contaminants, including PCBs, dioxins and dibenzofurans. The same thing happened to birds exposed to high concentrations of selenium in California in the 1980s.
- ✦ However, unlike the previous outbreaks, the birds in Alaska, at least, do not seem to be passing the deformity from parents to children. But that hasn’t been determined conclusively.
- ✦ The Alaska chickadees with the deformity had a “highly significant” amount of damage to their DNA.

NO RECOGNIZABLE PATTERN

Scientists know that a vitamin D deficiency has caused beak overgrowth in domestic parrots. Maybe birds in the Northwest and Alaska don’t get enough vitamin D from sunlight?

But that’s something that’s been going on forever. “Why suddenly now, here?” Handel said.

Likewise, there are reasons to think this isn’t a simple case of chemicals causing the defects, said Chuck Henny, a wildlife ecologist with the Geological Survey in Corvallis, Ore.

“In general, these pesticides, their residues have been going down over time,” Henny said. Plus, the fact that pesticides were used everywhere “argues against that being a major factor. (This) seems like it’s something that’s local or regional,” Henny said.

When the defects first came to light in an Anchorage neighborhood where pesticides had been sprayed to kill an outbreak of spruce beetles, scientists



focused on the poisons. But these birds have turned up far from any obvious human influence. Even chickadees, which generally live all their lives in a single contained area, have been discovered with the weird beaks way out in the wilderness.

One class of chemicals that researchers know has been accumulating in increasing amounts in humans in North America at the same time the beaks phenomenon appeared is polybrominated diphenyl ethers, PBDEs.

But again, what explains the concentration in Alaska and the Northwest? PBDEs are used everywhere.

Researchers are still trying to make sure they understand the extent of the problem. That's why they are asking the public to notify them about any long-billed birds.

"They see it and think, 'Oh, how unusual,' not realizing it's part of a much bigger problem," Anderson said.

Invariably, when he gives talks on this, a number of people in the audience tell him they've seen such birds.

"People see this and they say 'How odd,' and they tell a few people and forget about it," Anderson said. ☒



Advertising Now Available!!!

We are now accepting advertising for your Pyrrhura babies, singles, and breeders for the PBA newsletter. Deadlines will be posted to the PBA Yahoo list and can be emailed to Joi West at wildwest@nwi.net.

Website ads are still available and can be emailed to Joi at the above email address.

We request that your advertising contain only Pyrrhura species. If you breed other species, you may state in your ad that you have other species available. Please include your preferred contact method, prices for the birds, and if shipping is available. ☒

Welcome To Our
Newest Members!
William "Bill" Saylors
Diana Megginson
Jim Heffernan
Sherri Lewis
James Peacock
Marianne Waldman

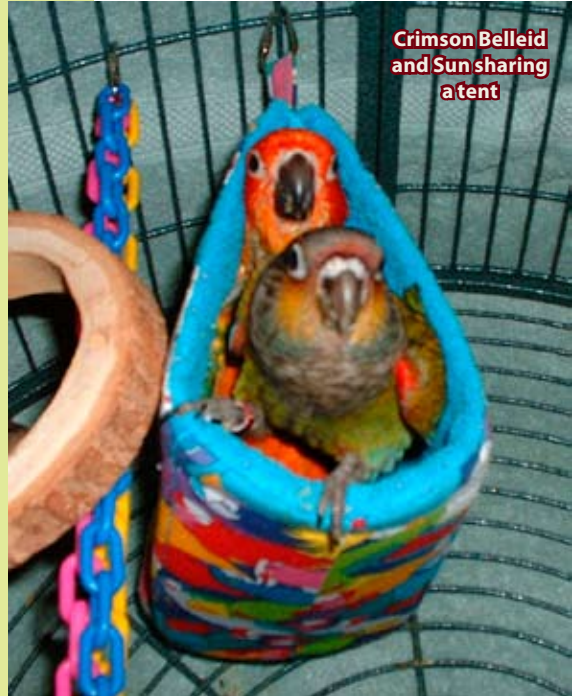
Treasurer's Report: (as of end of October 2008)

Sept Balance	\$4038.15
Deposits	\$40.00
Withdrawals	0.00
<hr/>	
Balance as of 10-28-08	\$4078.15

Rosifrons and pineapple



Crimson Belleid and Sun sharing a tent



Pineapple youngsters



CB's sharing a tent--- where'd the Sun go?



Crimson Bellied youngsters--- not quite enough room for 4!



Photos courtesy of Marcy Covault