

Avian Practice



biting louse infestation in a cockatiel

Colin C. Bullmore, DVM

Carmichael Animal Hospital
5536 Marconi Avenue
Carmichael, CA 95608

Feather disorders are common in pet birds. Signs of discomfort, including excessive preening, ruffling, chewing or plucking of feathers, can be caused by stress, dermatitis or parasitic infestations. While stress is probably the most common cause of feather picking, external parasites should not be overlooked as a possible source of irritation.¹

Case Report

A young male cockatiel had a history of excessive ruffling of the feathers and frequent, vigorous feather-chewing episodes. Examination revealed several dark-brown 2- to 3-mm lice moving rapidly among the feathers of the dorsal thorax. The parasite was identified microscopically as the biting louse, *Pectinopygus* sp (suborder Ischnocera) (Fig 1).

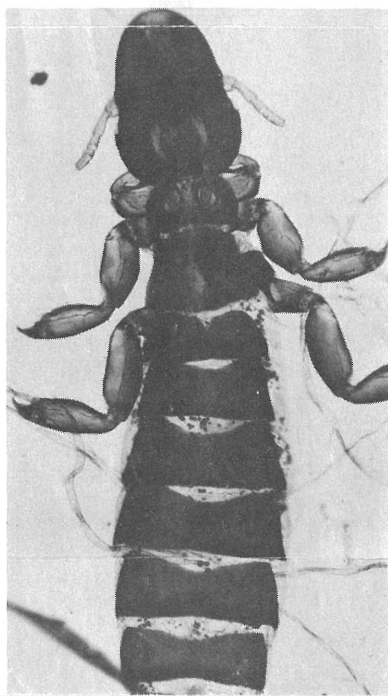


Fig 1. Biting louse, *Pectinopygus* sp.

Treatment consisted of dusting the bird with a 0.5% carbaryl powder made by blending 1 part flea powder (containing 5% carbaryl) with 9 parts of talcum powder.² The bird was placed in a plastic bag containing the diluted powder with the edges drawn up around the neck, leaving only the head exposed. Careful agitation of the bag provided a thorough, even dusting of the bird from the neck caudad. The owner was instructed to clean the cage and repeat the bird-dusting procedure in 7-10 days.

Discussion

All species of bird lice are of the biting type.³ They are dorsoventrally flattened, wingless, obligatory parasites that are host specific and spread by direct contact.¹ The life cycle is 3-4 weeks long and is spent entirely on the bird. The eggs or nits are glued to the feather shafts and hatch in 4-8 days. Three nymphal stages develop before the final ecdysis to the adult form in 14-21 days. The adults can live for several months and feed upon the sheaths of growing feathers, epidermal debris and in some cases (suborder Amblycera) blood from the base of feather quills.¹ Many wild birds carry lice that in small numbers are considered relatively harmless.⁴

During the winter months, when birds congregate and huddle for warmth, louse populations can increase tremendously and result in clinical disease. While solitary house pets are not commonly affected by lice, these parasites can be a significant problem in outdoor aviaries. Outdoor nest boxes can be dusted with 2-5% carbaryl if needed. ■

References

1. Petrak, ML: *Diseases of Cage and Aviary Birds*. Lea & Febiger, Philadelphia, 1982.
2. Stunkard, JA: *A Guide to Diagnosis, Treatment, & Husbandry of Caged Birds*. Veterinary Medicine Publishing, Edwardsville, KS, 1981.
3. Sloss, MW: *Veterinary Clinical Parasitology*. 4th ed. Iowa State Univ Press, Ames, 1970.
4. Arnall, L and Keymer, IF: *Bird Diseases*. T.F.H. Publications, Neptune City, NJ, 1975.