

EXTERNAL BIRD PARASITES

All animals, including birds, reptiles, fish and people, can be infested with external parasites such as mites, lice and ticks, stressing the overall health of the victim. Although a parasite harms a host, it does not usually kill the host or it would eventually run out of a place to live. While most **external bird parasites** spend their entire life cycle on the bird's skin or feathers, some live part of their life in the environment (YOUR "nest"!) and others may infest the bird's respiratory tract.



COMMON EXTERNAL BIRD PARASITES

Cere or Knemidocoptic Mites

- Commonly called Scaly-face or Scaly-leg
- The most common mite found on pet birds, mainly affecting budgies and canaries, rarely other parrots or finches
- This type of **external bird parasite** will not affect other pets or people
- Cause thickened skin or a crust around the cere (area just above the beak), vent, face, eyelids, legs and feet ("tasselfoot")
- Burrow into affected areas, leaving tiny holes in the skin and a powdery residue
- Affected birds are extremely uncomfortable, itching and scratching

Red Mites

- Small arachnids, these mites are relatives to spiders and ticks
- Will cause extensive scratching and restlessness
- Feed on the bird's blood, contributing to anemia and bacterial infections
- Generally active at night, leaving the bird to deposit eggs in the environment
- May also feed on other pets and people
- Can be seen crawling on the bird at night or on a white cage cover

Feather Mites

- These **external bird parasites** will eat holes in the feathers, causing damaged or broken feathers and in extreme cases, baldness
- Birds are often restless at night, when mites are active and sucking blood
- Microscopically small, tiny holes may be seen in the shaft by holding the feather up to bright light
- While these mites do not bother people, they will retire off the bird during the day in your home.

Air Sac Mites

- Also called the canary lung mite
- Live in the respiratory tract of canaries and finches
- Birds have difficulty breathing, may open-mouth breathe
- Mites may be seen as grains of pepper inside the trachea using a bright light

Lice

- There are several various types of lice which may feed on the blood, feathers or skin
- Bird lice will not feed on other pets or people and are often bird species specific
- Lice live their entire life cycle on the bird, leaving only to attack another bird victim
- Clusters of eggs (nits) are laid along the shaft of feathers
- Adult lice may live for several months on the bird
- While you may notice restlessness, excessive preening, and ruffled feathers, the plumage may not appear damaged

CONTROL TIPS

- Early detection is key to preventing and controlling **external bird parasites** – *daily* cage cleaning, grooming and monitoring are important bird owner responsibilities.
- Often invisible to the naked eye, diagnosis should be confirmed (often by a skin scraping and microscopic exam) by a veterinarian.
- Prescription drugs are often the most effective and safest treatment for **external bird parasites**. When treating air sac mites it must be administered carefully as a quick-kill of a large infestation of mites may suffocate your bird.
- If you have multiple birds, treat them all even if only one seems affected.
- Several premise treatments may be needed to break the life cycle of mite refugees within the bird cage and your home.
- Mites will reproduce faster in warm, humid conditions.
- Keep in mind that **external bird parasites** may cause secondary infections – and that feather and skin conditions may be caused by poor nutrition, feather chewing and viral, bacterial or fungal infections. (Sort of a “What comes first? The chicken or the egg?” scenario!)

QUESTIONS?

ANIMART’s Feathered Department specialists or Veterinary Wellness Center staff can help you prevent, identify and control **external bird parasites**. Call 608.242.2140 ext 4251 or email vetclinic@animart.com.

