

The Silent Parrot Killer

By Katrina Coleman



Baby was nine years old and already a master of disguise. He was a blue and gold macaw and loved by everyone. He had a wonderful sense of humor and an insatiable appetite and never even gave a hint of his illness until seven weeks before his death. Louise Bauck, DVM writes, "The first signs are subtle and often missed." If there were signs, Baby's were missed. By the time I realized something was wrong it was much too late to save him. Baby was very affectionate and always had a kiss in store for me. He never stopped playing with and tormenting his brother Sammy. He loved hanging around by his toe nails exposing his belly tempting the next passerby to get it. But his most admirable characteristic was his electric personality and it was present even until the end. I could have never guessed he was so sick. What I wouldn't give to know then what I know now. I pray that by sharing with you some of what I have

learned I might be able to save at least one bird and Baby's death will not have been in vain.

Most of the following information was learned over the last six weeks of Baby's life. He was being treated and monitored on a daily basis under the careful and watchful eye of his veterinarian Dr. Sam Vaughn. Dr. Vaughn also made a believer out of me of the importance of an uncontaminated, nutritional diet and clean environment.

The single most memorable piece of advice I was given that I will pass along to you is to never, ever give a parrot a peanut in the shell. Every single source of information I have found on this subject is in total agreement. Virginia Caputo, author of *Aspergilliosis & Jardine's Parrots* says: "Peanuts grow in the ground and are considered to be a common source of aspergillus and also of aflotoxins which can sicken birds. **Be aware of the possibility of mold growing in all seeds and nuts.**"

Aspergillosis is usually a respiratory fungal infection caused by aspergillus spores that become airborne. Through Dr. Vaughn I also learned spores can be ingested and spread throughout the gastrointestinal tract, and that is how aspergillosis killed Baby. His reluctance to talk was the only sign he presented but I didn't know it was something I should have been concerned about. Silence is deadly in a parrot. A little known fact to the average bird owner is that acute (sudden and severe) infections often cause a voice to change or disappear completely and these cases are usually not diagnosed until after death. So please, I beg of you, do not wait until you see clinical signs, by then it



is usually too late. Take your bird in to a qualified avian veterinarian every six (6) months for a check-up. Subtle changes in bloodwork will tell your vet to investigate further. For years Dr. Pat Redig, a researcher at the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center, has strived to shed light on the ability to diagnose aspergillosis and has been irreplaceable to falconers and veterinarians and at the University of Miami a test has been developed that allows us to screen parrots for early or mild infections. If I had taken Baby after six months instead of one year I wouldn't be writing this now.

The chronic cases (long term) are somewhat easier to spot. There are symptoms to be seen but they are often associated with other illnesses. A well informed and observant parrot owner has a much better chance of stopping this disease before it consumes their parrot. Some symptoms that can catch your attention are:

- Nasal discharge
- Weight loss (especially if the bird appears to be eating well)
- Diarrhea
- Flakey or delaminating beak
- Unstructured or frayed feathers
- Black edged feathers on the outside of the wings
- Extreme itchiness
- Tail bobbing
- Labored respiration
- Change in the pitch of voice
- Loss of voice and
- Extreme change in behavior



valid or not.

Birds that have been mean and hard to handle all their lives (especially breeders) all of a sudden decide to be nice and let you scratch their heads or even pick them up need immediate attention. Dr. Vaughn tells me that when he looks at his appointment book for the day and one appointment says "loss of voice" or "nail trim because the bird is nice today" or "for the first time in 25 years he has turned into a very nice bird", he always cringes because he knows he is most likely going to have a critically ill patient on his hands. It is very important to give your vet any and all information you can whether you think it is

Aspergillus is everywhere; it can grow on bread, in rotting vegetation, in materials used to line cages and on living tissue. Every speck of dust and dirt and every batch of corncob bedding have spores of at least one species of Aspergillus. A parrot does not usually succumb to the disease when it has a strong immune system. Over time it has built up antibodies strong enough to wage a proper war against the spores. But, a weakened immune system or ingestion of a huge amount of spores is what causes this disease. Every animal with lungs



breathes in thousands of Aspergillus spores every day. The spores cannot grow in the lungs of a healthy body, but an unhealthy body can easily become a host. Aspergillosis can consume a parrot with a weakened immune system. Poor nutrition, another illness, anxiety, loneliness, old age, unsanitary conditions or disturbed soil can also bring on this illness.

Always keep your parrot's immune system as healthy as possible. A constant and gradual exposure can create a chronic (long term) infection and the causes are all too commonly found in places you would never expect. Many parrot foods even have

the potential to cause a parrot to ingest spores. In every chronic case the slow growing fungus is also very slow to die and recovery can take time. The treatments often last for months or even years. Aspergillosis will never go away on its own.

Unfortunately, almost all caged birds are eating poor diets, deficient in important vitamins, minerals, amino acids and ample supplies of protein. Stress runs a close race with poor nutrition as being the most common cause of a weakened immune system allowing the Aspergillus spores to grow. I've listed a few stressors you should be concerned about.

- Spending much of the day in restricted isolation.
- Shipping
- Quarantine
- Overcrowding
- Trauma
- Injury
- Smoke inhalation
- Prolonged antibiotic therapy
- Being a breeder (laying eggs and caring for the young)
- Aspiration as a baby

Aspiration is when some formula gets into the bird's abdominal air sacs or lungs. According to Samuel B. Vaughn, BS, DVM, ABVP (AVIAN), approximately 79% of hand fed psittacines develops some degree of aspiration. Food normally does not go into the lungs but sometimes the gut shoots it straight down into the abdominal air sacs. A small cluster of infection may lay dormant for years but may show up 20 years down the road and develop into an Asper granuloma (tumor made of Asper spores) and wreak havoc with your bird.

A list of possible contaminates that I never would have expected follows. I hope it brings to your attention just how careful you must be.

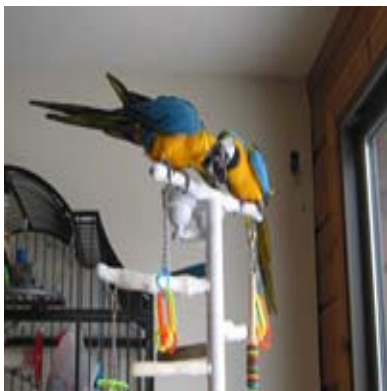
- PEANUTS, never give a bird a peanut
- Sunflower seeds if their growing season was really wet or the seeds weren't harvested on time (in essence avoid sunflower seeds since there is no way to detect their history)

- corn cob bedding and other organic matter
- walnut shells
- wood bark (mulch)
- the air during spring planting and fall harvesting on farms
- construction sites where soil is being moved
- damp nesting materials
- potting soil and peat moss, don't transplant or plant when your birds are around
- wet shavings or other litter
- dried corn
- moldy parrot seed
- fresh fruits and vegetables, if they are not human grade produce **and** have not been washed with soap and water and a scrub brush
- A warm humid environment, this can speed up the deterioration of nutrients in a parrot's food and increase the possibility of spores becoming rampant



Remember; "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Once this disease has set in it is very hard to conquer. I have also listed a few simple but critical preventative measures to include in your daily routine.

- Change their water twice a day and any time they have bathed in it or contaminated it.
- Give your parrot fresh food every day.
- Fresh air and exercise are very important, a lack of them can compromise the immune system.
- Remove fresh produce within four hours
- Wash and disinfect cages, toys and perches weekly.



- Boil their water, even bottled or spring water since it is not guaranteed that it doesn't contain harmful bacteria. A gallon of boiled water kept in the refrigerator will last for days. Just save it for the birds their immune systems are much more delicate than ours.

- Provide good ventilation.
- Provide clean bowls, stainless steel is preferable.
- Provide extra nutrition to your breeders.
- Make sure their nesting materials are clean and dry.

Spores can penetrate fresh or incubating eggs and will kill the embryos.

- Eliminate poor ventilation, poor sanitation, dusty conditions and close confinement, these can all increase the chance spores will be inhaled.
- Place an air filter in their room (HEPA® (high efficient particle air) filters are best)

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information to include in “The Silent Parrot Killer” and to give me a better chance of giving Sammy the opportunity to have a long and healthy life.

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