

BUDGIES: MOLTING BASICS by Maevonne Lee

“IT LOOKS LIKE MY BUDGIE EXPLODED!”

Molting occurs at least once a year and is a normal process whereby a budgie's feathers are shed and replaced with new ones. A molt can last a couple of months. If it was to be sudden and all feathers lost at once (known as “*catastrophic molt*” in other kinds of birds), a budgie would not be able to fly or keep warm, and in the wild would not survive.

Triggers for molting include weather or environmental changes and dietary changes. Research indicates links between molts, hormone levels, breeding cycles, and daylight hours. A budgie that is molting should not be encouraged to breed.



Fig. 1 - My budgie Benji looking a little rough around the edges. You can see at least two small patches on his front where there are fewer feathers than normal (blue arrows).



Fig. 2 (above) - There will be lots of feathers of all shapes and sizes dropping from various parts of your budgie's body during a molt.

It is quite common for pet budgies to molt during any season, especially when the home temperature is otherwise constant throughout the year. They can molt up to three times a year, although more than likely this involves a “*soft molt*” where quite a few feathers are lost but not the tail or flight feathers.

JUVENILE MOLT

Around three to four months of age, a budgie goes through its first molt. This is often referred to as the “*juvenile molt.*” (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3 (right) - The young budgie on the left is molting and has several visible pin feathers on his head. (Photo: S. McIntyre)

THINGS YOU WILL NOTICE INCLUDE:

- Loose feathers on the cage floor (Fig. 2)
- A quieter, scruffy-looking, and perhaps bad-tempered budgie (Figs. 1, 4)
- Spiky regrowths appearing as the new feathers come through (i.e. “pin feathers”)
- Lots of preening of the feathers, especially tail feathers, until the new ones are through
- An itchy budgie that may call on you for a head scratch while molting (Fig. 5)



Fig. 4 - My budgie Toby at the beginning of a molt. There is some pink skin showing above his cere, where some feathers have molted out, and soon new feathers will appear.



Fig. 5 (above) – (left to right: Benji, Toby, Benji again) Typical scratching and preening behavior of a molting budgie.



PIN FEATHERS

Pin feathers start out as little bumps on the pinkish skin of the budgie. As they grow, they often look pale pink and fluid inside their protein casings. At this stage, the areas with pin feathers can feel very sensitive to the budgie. (Fig. 6)

Some pin feathers may have little dark tips, depending on the budgie's color mutation.

Fig. 6 - Benji with pin feathers in early development directly above the center of his cere. They look like small stiff tubules filled with a pinkish fluid.

As it develops, a pin feather takes on a whitish waxy look and becomes more solid. (Fig. 7)

Eventually the outer whitish protein casing falls off, usually from being scratched or removed by the budgie's beak, leaving what may look like white (or light gray, dark gray, black) dandruff-looking flakes or particles all around.

Remember that until a feather is mature, it has a full blood supply connection, so breakage will result in bleeding (see "Blood Feathers" below).



Fig. 7 - Both budgies have mature pin feathers that are ready or close to being ready to be released as the protein casings fall off. (Photo: R.Ahmed)



BLOOD FEATHERS

Blood feathers (Fig. 8) are pin feathers that still have an active blood supply and are not mature enough yet for the protein sheath protecting the new feather to be preened or fall off. Feathers in the wings and in the tail are the largest on a bird and therefore have the largest blood supply going to them. These shafts grow from a follicle in the skin, much like human hair. Because they are supplied with blood while they are growing, they are like pipelines to a bird's blood supply. Breakage will result in bleeding, which will stop on its own or will need to be stopped, then the feather pulled to avoid re-bleed (another topic for another article).

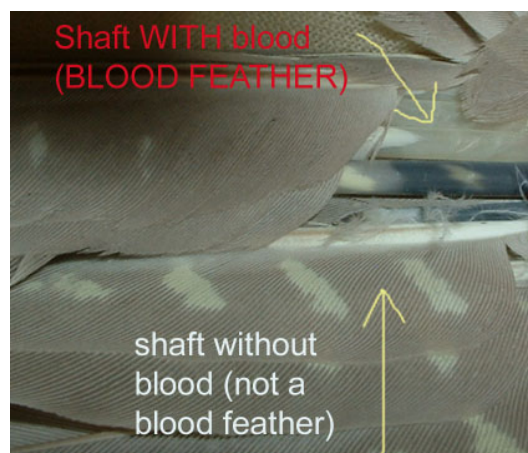


Fig. 8 – Blood feather (of a cockatiel) has blood in the shaft. (Photo: tailfeathersnetwork; "Nicole")

SUPPORTIVE CARE DURING MOLTS

Molting is physically demanding on a bird, so special attention to diet is required during a molt. Continue with a good quality seed mix, fresh fruit and vegetables. Also offer spray millet and sources of calcium and protein. Have available plenty of cuttlebone, calcium, iodine and mineral blocks, and good sources of protein, such as hard-boiled egg, peas, broccoli, cooked potato, spinach, and sweet corn.

Bathing is especially important while molting, so offer a bath dish or mist your budgie. (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9 – Toby (after his bath) with a dense patch of pin feathers on his head.

Some budgies have more difficult molts than others. Such molts are especially obvious when they occur all in one area, like on the head. (Figs. 10, 11, 12)

Older budgies can experience difficulty when molting due to the extra strain put on them at this time.

Monitor them closely, let them rest, and keep them warm.

Fig. 10 (*right*) – Budgie experiencing a rather difficult molt (i.e. head, cheeks)!
(Photo: K.Morgan)

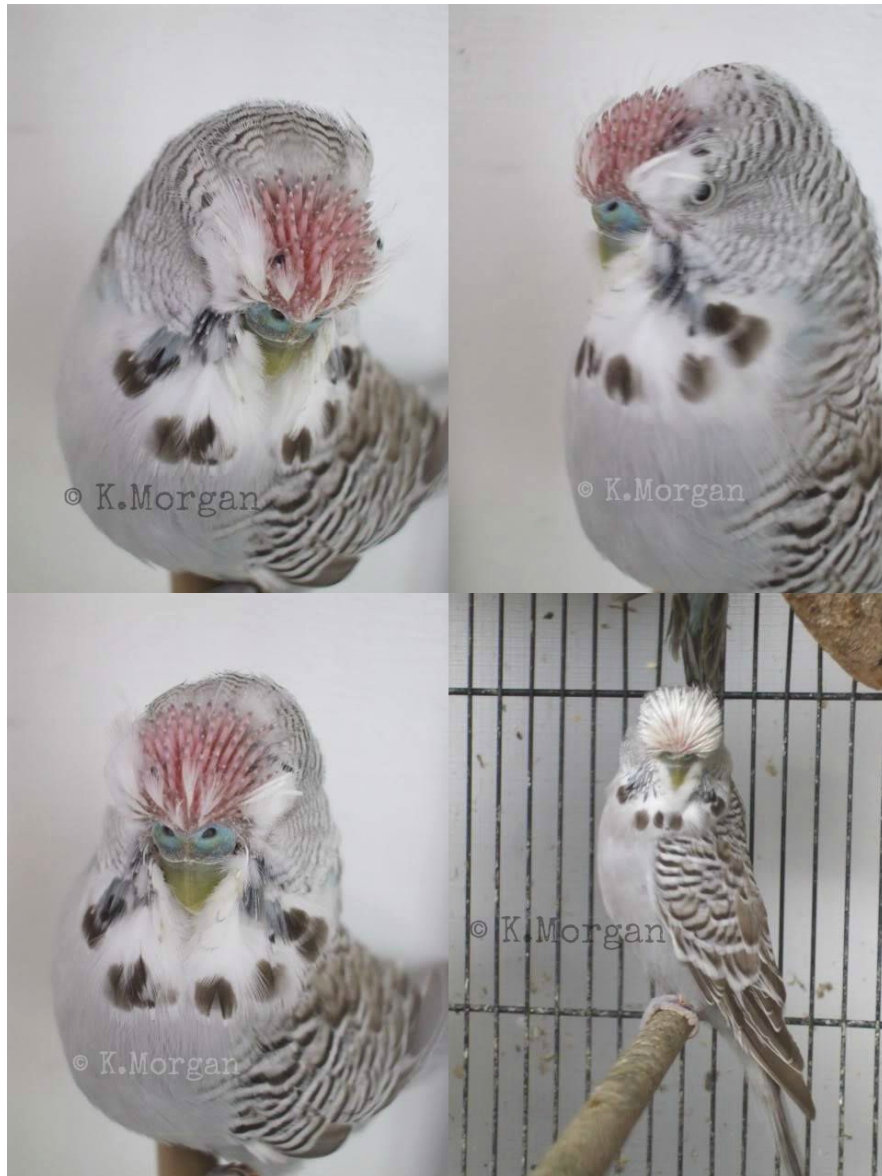


Fig. 11 (*left*) – Another example of a budgie experiencing a severe and localized molt. (Photo: K.Morgan)

Sources include (but are not limited to):

- Budgie e-Book (Let's Talk Birds Budgie Handbook), Section 6F, page 37.
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/BudgiesHelpAndAdvice/344375662424518/>

(NOTE: The e-book is available in our **Files** and contains a lot of basic information budgie keepers will find useful.)

- http://www.birds-online.de/gesundheit/gesgefieder/normalemauser_en.htm