

WING TRIMMING



INTRODUCTION

The majority of avian physiology has developed around the need for flight. Bone and muscle structure, gastrointestinal physiology, and kidney function have all developed around this activity. Birds use flight for a variety of reasons including foraging for food, finding other birds to socialize or breed with, and escaping danger and predation. When we take away a bird's ability to fly, we can create unexpected physical and psychological impacts on the bird. The decision to trim or not trim the wings of a bird should be made after careful consultation with an avian veterinarian so that the pros and cons of wing trimming can be reviewed and discussed. It should be noted that in some countries wing trimming is against regulations; check with your avian veterinarian about the laws in your country.

The goal of trimming feathers is to limit lift while at the same time allowing for a gentle and safe landing. It is important to realize that a properly executed wing trim will NOT render a bird flightless when taken outside on a windy day.

Do Young Birds Need to Learn to Fly Before Considering a Wing Trim?

Learning to fly for a young bird is similar to learning how to balance and walk for a young human being. Mastery of the skills of takeoff and landing are critical to the development of independence of a young bird, and undoubtedly to their overall mental well-being. Therefore, age of trimming is important. Evidence suggests it is critical for a young bird to learn how to fly and negotiate its environment well prior to consideration of any modification of flight, both for the psychological and physiological well-being of the bird. Therefore, it is not recommended wing trims be performed on young birds prior to their learning to fly and successfully land, at least several times, in order to build confidence.

To Trim or Not to Trim?

An avian veterinarian can help you to evaluate the important factors when deciding whether to trim your bird's wings, such as: lifestyle, behavior, temperament and activity of the bird, physical build of the bird (slim-bodied vs heavy-bodied, long-tailed vs short-tailed), and potential household hazards (e.g. windows, young children, and other pets such as cats, dogs, and other birds). Supervision when out of the cage, activities in the household, and ability to train the bird are also important considerations.

Trimming wings and hindering the flight of a bird too radically may increase the risk of the bird sustaining significant physical injury from falls, including fractures or injuries of the beak, wings, legs, keel bone and pygostyle (tail bone). Trimming may have unintended consequences with regard to the psychological well-being of the bird, including diminished confidence, independence and sense of security. Ultimately, the safety and overall health of the bird must be taken into consideration, including the ability of the bird to find a safe shelter in the event its life may be endangered (for example, to escape predation or navigate away from a boiling pot of water). On the other hand, flighted birds can accidentally fly into a window when startled or escape the home through an open door or window, never to be seen again.

Feathers on the Wing

In order to discuss wing trims on birds, one must first learn the names of the types of feathers on a bird's wing. The figure below illustrates the names of the most important feathers for flight.

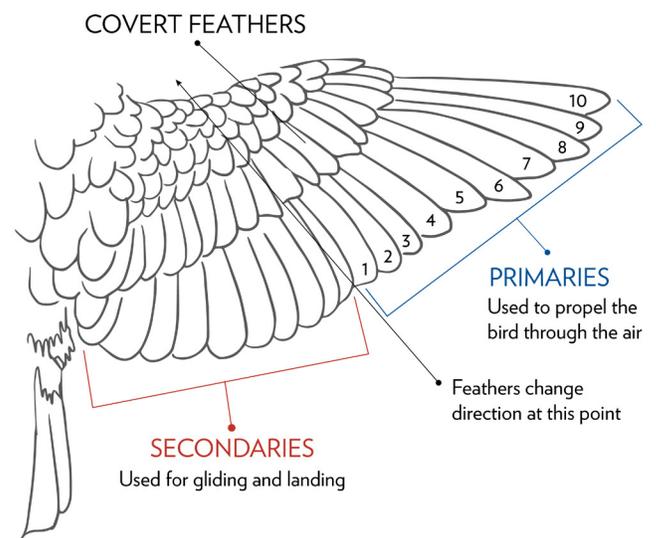


Figure 1. Wing Feathers



Figure 2. Blood feathers in the wing of an African Grey Parrot (A) and a Moluccan cockatoo (B). Note that some species have dark colored blood feathers, and some have pink colored blood feathers. If the blood feather is cut or broken along the developing shaft, persistent bleeding will occur.

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What Type of Trim is Appropriate for Your Bird?

If the decision is made to trim feathers, several techniques may be employed. The goal of trimming feathers is to limit lift while at the same time allowing a gentle, safe, and controlled landing. For this purpose, wings should always be clipped on both sides in a symmetric way; trimming only one wing results in loss of balance during attempted flight and significantly increases the risk of injury to the bird. Initially, a more conservative trim will allow the bird to adjust to a change in its ability to fly and negotiate a safe landing. Additionally, a conservative trim allows the possibility for the trim to be modified in accordance to the bird's response to the trim. It is best to be initially conservative when trimming wings and allow a "test flight" over a soft landing surface after the trim to gauge overall results and control of flight post-trim. If the initial wing trim is determined to be inadequate, it can easily be adjusted

to better fit your bird. It is important to note that trimming feathers is not painful to the bird; it is analogous to a hair cut for a person. The effects are also temporary, though it can take months for all the trimmed flight feathers to be replaced.

The choice on how to cut the feathers is often based on personal preference, in which the cosmetic and esthetic effect as well as the support of neighboring feathers may be important factors to consider. Three techniques are presented below; a traditional and more aggressive "transecting" trim, a "curved" trim, and a suggested third "skinny trim."

Wing Trimming Techniques

Traditional "Transecting" Trim

The traditional transecting trim includes a transverse cut of the outer primaries either at approximately midshaft (Figure 3) or just under the covert feathers (Figure 4). The midshaft trim is preferred by some because the cut primaries still have enough length to provide support for newly developing feathers during molt. Trimming anywhere in between the short trim under the coverts and the midshaft trim can lead to feathers poking into the bird's sides; this is uncomfortable and is thought to predispose to feather damaging behavior.



Figure 3. Traditional "Transecting" Trim - Midshaft Trim



Figure 4. Traditional "Transecting" Trim - Short Trim Under the Covert Feathers

Curved Trim

With the "curved" trim, the primary feathers are clipped in a curved pattern whereby the outer primary (P10) is cut the shortest and the most inner primary (P1) is kept the longest (Figure 5). This trim leads to an attractive cosmetic appearance to the wing; additionally, there is good support from adjacent feathers when blood feathers are growing in.



Figure 5. Curved Trim



[Photo credit: From Samour J, editor: Avian medicine, ed 3. Elsevier. St. Louis, MO, 2015, p 525.]

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“Skinny” Trim (Suggested)

The “skinny trim,” introduced by Dr. Todd Driggers, takes a bit more time and practice to execute correctly, but allows better control of the landing, thereby protecting the tail and keel from injury; additionally, this trim allows the bird to glide more effectively, without gaining height, and therefore encourages muscular exercise.



Figure 6. “Skinny” trim: This trim is performed by trimming the back edge of the primary feathers at the rachis, leaving the tips of the primary flight feathers intact. The tips can be modified, leaving more or less of the trailing edge and tip to alter how well the bird can fly. Again, trim both wings equally.

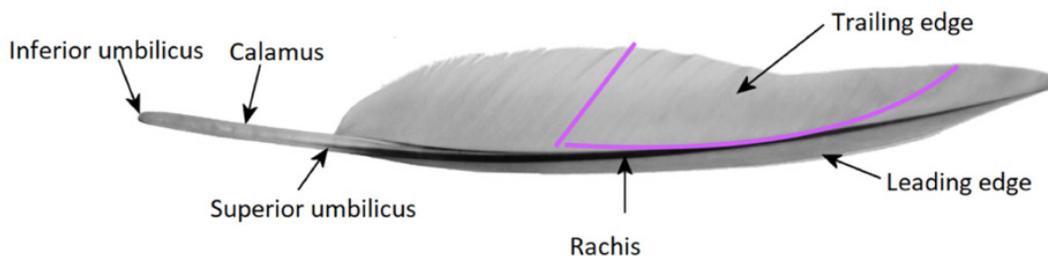


Figure 7. Line diagram of the skinny trim. The purple lines indicate the portion of the feather that is removed with scissors.

How Many Feathers Should Be Trimmed?

Birds with longer tails and birds that are small and light (such as parakeets) are generally stronger fliers and may require more feathers to be trimmed to modify flight. Generally, in small birds or strong fliers, primary feathers 1-10 are trimmed at approximately midshaft. For poor fliers, or larger birds, a more conservative trim of primary feathers 5-10 may best. Remember, it is always better to be conservative with a wing trim and adjust the trim after the test flight, rather than remove too many feathers and increase the risk of crashing. Take care not to trim any blood feathers. Trimming only one wing or leaving the outside primary wing feathers (P 9,10) is not recommended; both of these types of trims can lead to poor control of flight and increased risk of injury. The secondary flight feathers should not be trimmed either as these feathers are needed to allow the bird to glide down and land in a controlled manner.

Suggested Reading

1. <http://www.goodbirdinc.com/professional-articles-training-birds-for-husbandry.html>
2. <https://lafeber.com/pet-birds/free-flight-lessons-exoticscon/>
3. <http://learningparrots.com/blog/training/so-you-want-to-train-your-pet-parrot-for-freeflight/>

Concluding remarks

Flying can be beneficial to your bird's physical and mental health in numerous ways, so the decision to trim a bird's wings should not be taken lightly. Alternatives to wing trimming can include teaching your bird to “station,”¹ creating a safe, indoor flight path (such as up and down a hallway), training your bird to wear a harness, and even exploring the possibility of free-flying.^{2,3}

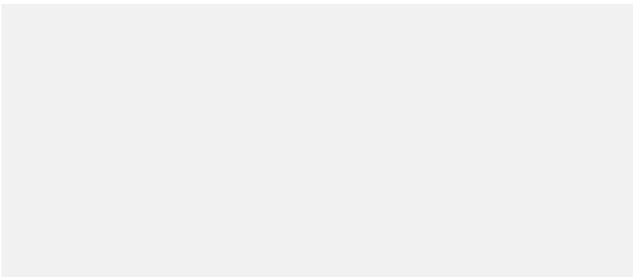
Remember that your avian veterinarian is an excellent resource for answering any questions related to your bird's health and can help guide you to make the best decision regarding wing trimming for you and your bird.

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Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.



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For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry*

**Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

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