

Caution - Artificial Sweeteners & Birds by *Dennis Saydak*

Hi Folks; some of you may remember us as the proprietors of The Best Little Hen House (Manitoba parrot breeder) and former bird associations members. My wife Judy and I retired from breeding parrots at the end of 2006 and kept only one companion bird, Eggbert a Blue Fronted Amazon parrot who is now 10 years old. Eggbert became seriously ill a few years ago and no one we contacted was able to diagnose the cause of his illness, not even veterinarians. It took several years for us to figure out the cause of his illness and restore his good health. I decided to share his story in the hope that others can avoid the serious problem we encountered.



Back in 2010 Eggbert's behaviour started to change detrimentally and rapidly over a period of several months. It soon became clear that he was extremely ill for some reason. Having previously been a MAP (Model Aviculture Program) certified breeding facility we took disease prevention with our flock very seriously. We never experienced any contagious disease in our flock. So we were extremely puzzled as to why Eggbert was so ill. He became very lethargic, ate poorly, rarely flew (he was fully flighted and was previously an expert and active flyer) and he virtually stopped vocalizing. He also began to have seizures and experienced random panic attacks, which worried us greatly. At any moment, he would let out a blood curdling shriek and fly off his perch in panic mode for no apparent reason.

In February of 2010 Eggbert went through a rather unusual and lengthy soft moult. Normally he would replace his flight feathers at that time of year but not this time. It wasn't until the following year that he dropped only a few primary and secondary flight feathers. The replacement feathers looked horrible and Eggbert looked dishevelled in appearance as a result. One of his secondary wing coverts began to grow out continuously in length and it almost hung down to the bottom of his tail before it eventually stopped growing. It was also very limp as if suffering from a lack of protein. Several other major wing feathers grew out askew. Regardless of who I contacted from the veterinarian profession all they could suggest was Beak & Feather disease as a possible cause. I knew that was not remotely possible as Eggbert was our own bred baby bird who had never been exposed to any bird with that disease. As his condition progressively worsened over time we began to prepare ourselves for the possibility of losing him.

One day I was wracking my brain doing some research on the Internet in a last minute attempt to identify the cause of Eggbert's illness. I found an article about the possible side effects of Splenda (artificial sugar substitute). Lo and behold Eggbert exhibited many of the documented human side effects from artificial sweeteners including panic attacks. I also suspected that the reported loss of beneficial gut flora, which artificial sweeteners can cause was at the primary cause of his poor condition (i.e. he wasn't digesting food properly).

Judy had been sweetening her Yogurt with Splenda, which Eggbert received daily. Yogurt is normally a beneficial human food source but not in this case. It became more and more obvious to us that Eggbert developed a major intolerance to this artificial sweetener. We worried about whether or not he could fully recover. Judy immediately stopped using Splenda and our cherished pet rapidly began to improve. We also provided milk thistle powder daily to help cleanse his liver from any toxic accumulation effect that may have occurred. Although his behaviour soon returned to normal he did not have a normal moult for another year.



This picture shows several of Eggbert's bad feathers. I should have kept more of them but I didn't. The top feather is the one that grew out continuously. The bottom two feathers are the last ones that were shed recently. They were growing out sideways from his wing. If you look closely at the quill tips you can see they have a twisted corkscrew appearance.

Sometimes you have to be very observant and persistent in order to diagnose the cause of illness in a pet bird. In our case we are very fortunate that a solution was found before we lost our bird. I'm pleased to report that Eggbert has now made a complete recovery. The seizures and panic attacks have completely disappeared, his behaviour is back to normal and he looks very spiffy once again. Based on personal experience and observation we know that Splenda was the cause of Eggbert's illness. We sincerely hope that no one else will ever experience health problems with their bird caused by artificial sweeteners.