



**The Complete Avian Physical  
Examination : Before You Even  
Look at the Bird!**

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# Introduction

- Birds were heralded as the pet of the '90s
- Current pet bird population has been estimated to be 50-60 million (an underestimate I believe)
- In one study only 7.6% of bird owning households sought veterinary care
  - Compared with 78% of dog owners and 60% of cat owners
- Great need for veterinary services for pet birds

# Beginning in Avian Medicine

- Avian medicine has undergone an information explosion
- Beginning practitioners may be overwhelmed by the volume of information
- Various resources are available

# Basic References

- Association of Avian Veterinarians (AAV)
  - Members regularly receive journals and newsletters that include current research and topics related to avian medicine
  - Yearly conference provides opportunity to hear the latest research findings, as well as basic to advanced topics and wet labs
  - AAV membership meets the needs of the beginning and advanced avian practitioners
  - Anyone considering seeing birds should become a member

# Basic References

- Avian Medicine Textbooks
  - Diseases of Cage and Birds - Rosskopf and Woerpel
  - Avian Medicine: Principles and Application - Ritchie, Harrison and Harrison
  - Avian Medicine and Surgery - Altman, Clubb, Dorrestein, Quesenberry
  - Manual of Avian Practice - Rupley
  - Essentials of Avian Medicine : A Guide for Practitioners - Sakas

# Basic References

- Avian Laboratory References
  - Avian Hematology and Cytology - Campbell
  - Laboratory Medicine : Avian and Exotic Pets - Fudge
  
- Formularies
  - Exotic Animal Formulary - AAHA Press
  - Exotic Animal Formulary - Carpenter

# Basic References

- Avian Medicine Periodicals
  - Seminars in Avian and Exotic Pet Medicine-WB Saunders
  - Veterinary Clinics of North America/Exotic Animal Practice



# Basic References

## ■ Lay Publications

- Parrots of the World - Forshaw and Cooper
  - Lavishly illustrated book containing pictures of every imaginable type of parrot
  - Displays range in nature and basic physical characteristics
  - A must have book if you will be seeing parrots
- Bird Talk (and various other bird magazines)
  - You need to know what your clients are reading
  - Contains a great deal of useful information

# Basic References

## ■ General Avian Books

- There are many books written for the general public which contain useful information for the veterinarian as well
- Books that are especially helpful are books about parrot behavior
  - A great deal of your time will be spent on behavior issues in your avian practice

## ■ Web Sites

- There are some good ones, but exercise caution

# Geico Needs A New Pitchman

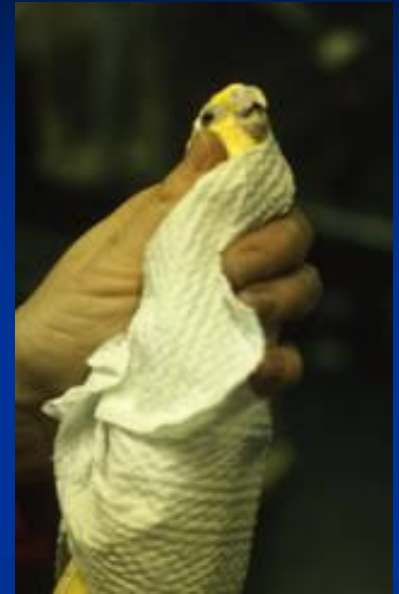


[www.StrangeZoo.com](http://www.StrangeZoo.com)

*Lets see the little  
jerk sell insurance  
now!*

# Basic Equipment

- Source of clean towels
  - Used for the restraint of birds
  - Small birds-bare hands
  - Mid-sized birds (cockatiels)-paper towels
  - Large birds-towels of the appropriate size



# Basic Equipment

- Source of direct light (especially important during the oral examination)
  - Overhead light in exam room
  - Penlight

# Basic Equipment

- Source of magnification
  - Binocular head loupe with magnification
  - Helpful during examination and surgery



# Basic Equipment

- Ophthalmic forceps
  - Small forceps, not rat toothed, are useful
  - Used to clean debris from the nares
  - Can open the mouth of a small bird during the exam



# Basic Equipment

- Mouth speculum

- Variety of sizes are available (Lafeber Co. Cornell, IL)
- Essential to complete the oral exam of large birds
- Some practitioners use scissors, hemostats, gauze strips or Nylabones





# Basic Equipment

- Gram scale
  - Every bird examined should be weighed
  - Prefer triple beam balance with “pot” attachment (Ohaus, Florham Park, NJ)
  - Can accommodate up to Amazon parrots or small cockatoos



# Basic Equipment

- Gram scale
  - Large birds are weighed on a pediatric scale, either wrapped in a towel or perching on the scale



# Basic Equipment

- Gram scale
  - Scales with built in perches do not work with most birds, as they are too frightened to remain perched





# Managing and Marketing the Avian Practice

- Avian practitioners feel mired down with the amount of time they spend exchanging information with clients and performing routine procedures
  - Vet techs and support personnel should be trained and utilized to take over these responsibilities
  - They can discuss the finer points of husbandry, biology and purchasing options with the owner
  - Nutritional counseling is a must

# Managing and Marketing the Avian Practice

- Printed handouts pertaining to bird care are helpful and should be provided to each client
  - AAV provides client materials
  - Write your own!
  - Contact me via email if you would like to use ours
    - Basic Bird Care, Pet Bird Nutrition, Recognizing Illness in Pet Birds, Household Hazards for Pet Birds

# Increasing the Avian Case Load

- Good working relationship with local pet stores and bird breeders
  - Principal source of referrals
  - Visit stores in person, offer discounted services to retailers and breeders, offer gross necropsies for N/C
- Offer seminars at local retailers, bird clubs and breeders
- Offer to write articles or question/answer column for club newsletter
- Hold an open house





# Selection of a Pet Bird

- Clients will look to the veterinarian as an expert that can help them with the selection of the proper bird for their circumstances
- There should be a familiarity with the characteristics/attributes of all the common species
  - Correctly identify birds clients have misidentified, understanding species specific medical conditions, counsel clients about behavioral issues

# Selection of a Pet Bird

- All too often birds are given away due to a poor relationship
- Even worse birds die due to inadequate or improper care
- Tremendous increase in the number of bird behaviorists and bird rescue organizations
- Past experience or the lack of it plays a key role in the selection of the type of bird

# Guidelines to Consider When Selecting a Bird

- Time commitment
- Expense
- Housing restrictions (apartment/condo)
- Noise potential for the bird
- Space constraints
- Dangers posed by other household pets
- Precautions due to children (birds do bite!)
- Allergic reactions (hypersensitivity pneumonitis)
- Amount of work caring for bird (cleaning/feeding)
- Talking ability (no guarantee bird WILL talk)
- Longevity of bird (special arrangements in will)
- Personality and attributes of bird (positives and negatives)
- Age of bird to be purchased (mature vs. neonate, weaned vs. unweaned)



# The Avian Physical Exam

- Do not underestimate the importance of thorough history taking and a complete physical examination
- Too often practitioners are eager to perform batteries of diagnostic tests but do not closely observe and physically examine the bird

# The Avian Physical Exam

- Early signs of disease are subtle and birds try to hide illness
  - Part of their natural defense mechanism
- By the time the bird owner notices that the bird is sick, they usually have advanced disease conditions
  - Quite often makes successful treatment difficult

# The Avian Physical Exam

A good history, careful observation of the bird while in the cage and a “hands on” physical examination enables the development of a more selective diagnostic plan





# Receptionist's Role

- Groundwork for good diagnostics begins with the initial call to the hospital
- Ask client to transport bird in regular, uncleaned cage with 24 hours of droppings on cage paper
  - If cage is too large to transport then place bird in carrier and just bring cage papers
- Client should bring medical records, including past and current medications as well as other pertinent information

# Technician's Role

- It would be totally impossible for me to see the number of avian patients that I examine without the assistance of our technicians.
- They conduct history taking, discuss pet bird husbandry, assist in handling during the examination, collect blood samples, perform our in house diagnostics, perform grooming, dispense the medications, teach the clients how to medicate the bird and answer any questions.

# Technician's Role

- If a bird requires hospitalization we have one of our technicians in charge of our “bird hospital” and she will take the bird in, treat it accordingly per the orders of the doctor.
- Her primary role are her bird room duties and if she has time will come up and assist in the exam rooms as well.

# Technician's Role

- If the doctor was to perform these activities by themselves each avian physical examination would take nearly an hour to cover all the aspects of diagnostics and client education.
- Properly trained technicians are critical for an effective avian physical examination and treatment.



# History

- Before examining the bird in detail, it is important to obtain as much information as possible from the owner
- The AAV has a very good client information and history form that can be used
- Take a careful and systematic approach
- You will develop your own set of questions over time

# History

- How long has client owned the bird?
- Where did they obtain it? Pet store? Breeder?
- What did they notice to be wrong with bird?
- When did the problem start? How long has it lasted?
- Is there a history of previous illnesses? Was there treatment? Was it effective?
- Are there any other birds at home? Have any been ill or died?

# History

- Has the bird been in contact with any other birds? Bird fanciers?
- Has there been any changes in the bird's environment?
- Has the client noticed any behavioral changes?
- What type of food is the bird fed?
- Where is the food stored?
- What type of nutritional supplements are given, if any?



# History

- Has the type of food been recently changed?  
Different source?
- Have the droppings changed in number, shape, color or appearance?
- Where is the cage located?
- Is the bird always watched? Is it allowed freedom outside the cage?

# History

- Although these questions can be asked by the veterinarian in the exam room, it is more efficient to have the clients fill out a history form while waiting in the reception area
- The form can be quickly perused prior to meeting with the owner allowing focus on the particular problem or concerns



# Client Education

- When a new client is placed in an exam room they are provided with our three basic bird care handouts.
- These handouts provide a framework for a discussion of pet bird husbandry.
- This is conducted by our technicians.
  - This frees up the doctors plus also provides the technician with contact time with the client

# Nutrition

- Evaluate the diet and level of nutrition of the bird
- What is the primary source of nutrition?
  - Seeds, pellets, home-made, mixture?
- Are supplements given?
- If fresh fruits or vegetables are given it should be emphasized that they should be washed to eliminate any herbicide/insecticide residue

# Nutrition

- The vast majority of birds suffer from malnutrition due to an unbalanced diet
- Proper nutrition must be stressed to the client!
- Hypovitaminosis A and hypocalcemia are two of the most common deficiencies seen

# Vitamin A

- Vitamin A maintains the mucous membranes and epithelial surfaces
- Vitamin A deficiencies can lead to secondary infections, development of mucus, plaques, abscessation, etc. in the mouth

# Vitamin A

- A seed diet must be supplemented with vitamin A sources
- Pelleted diets are complete and do not need supplementation
- Vitamin A sources include:
  - Red/orange vegetables such as carrots, squash, papaya, red peppers, sweet potatoes
  - Dark green leafy vegetables such as broccoli leaves, spinach



# Calcium

- The high fat content in seed binds to calcium, lowering availability
- Pelleted diets have adequate calcium and do not need to be supplemented
- Hypocalcemia may manifest itself as weakness, seizures or pathologic fractures
- Actively egg-laying birds need significant calcium supplementation

# Calcium

## ■ Calcium Sources

- Proper supplements should have a balance of calcium, phosphorus and vitamin D3
- Small birds-cuttlebones, mineral blocks, crushed oyster shell, mineral grit, osteoform
- Large birds usually do not receive an adequate supply of minerals as most forms are easily destroyed (e.g. cuttlebone) or just not given
  - Supplements are available for the food and water, mineral blocks designed for larger birds can be used

# Nutrition

- Discussion of conversion to a balanced diet is an essential part of the client education
- It can be very frustrating for the client to convert their birds to a formulated diet as they may be very reluctant to change
- Patience is the key
- Conversion should be gradual and careful monitoring of the condition of the bird is critical

# Nutrition

- A detailed discussion of conversion is outside the scope of our lecture today but an overview is in your handout as well as in our hospital handout if you would like to receive it via email

# Nutrition

- Quick synopsis of conversion
  - Use a twice a day feeding protocol
  - Monitor the droppings and the state of health carefully
  - Combination diets (seeds and pellets mixed together) such as Avicakes or Nutriberries can be useful





<http://go.to/funpic>

# Household Hazards

- Many common household furnishings can be very dangerous for pet birds
  - Windows and mirrors
  - Open doors and windows
  - Open containers of water
  - Ceiling fans
  - Loud noises
  - Other pets (dogs, cats, ferrets, other birds)

# Toxicoses

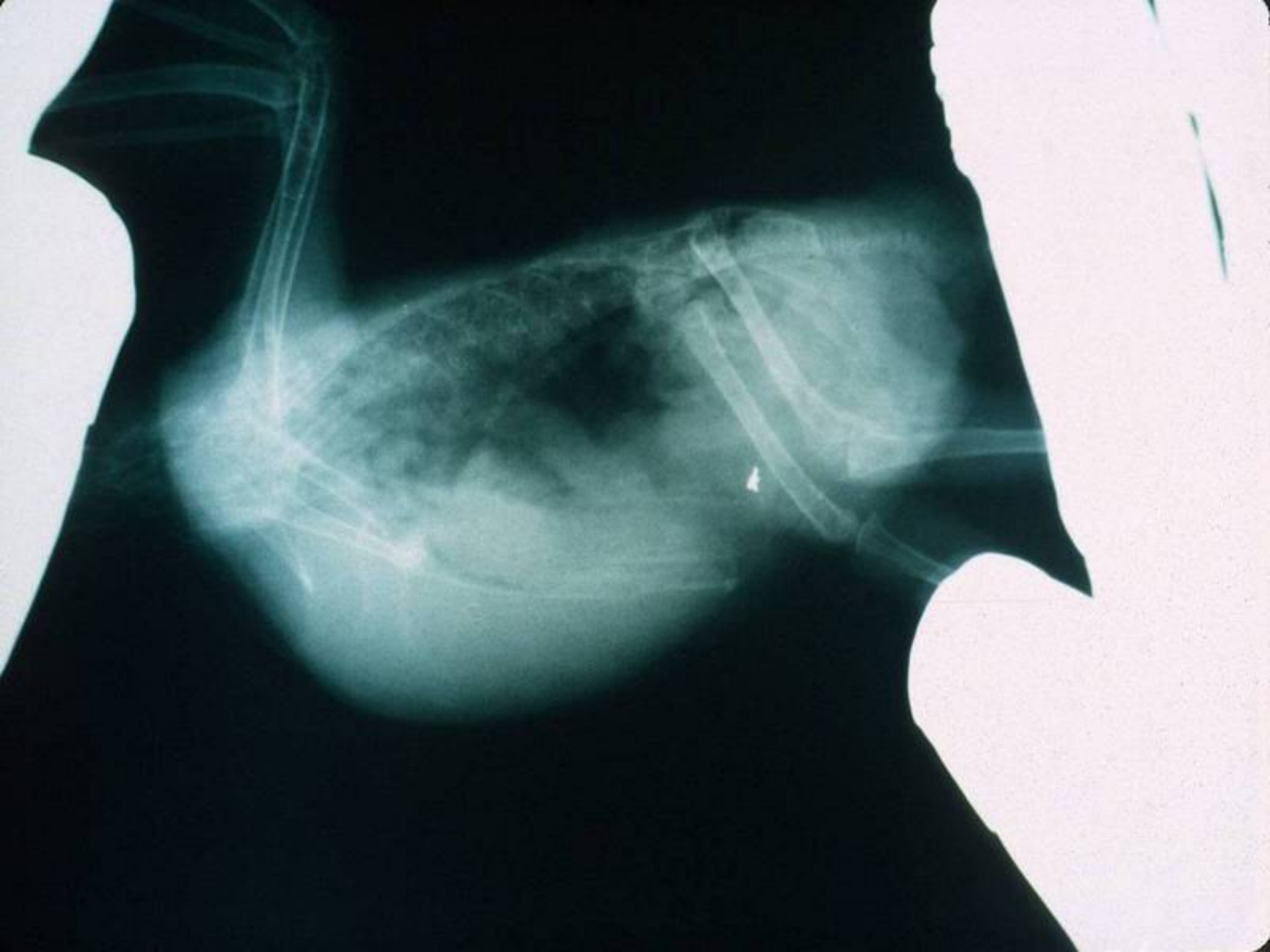
- Agricultural and gardening chemicals
- Rodenticides
- Mothballs
- Denture cleansing solution
- Disinfectants for cage cleaning
- Salt (in large amounts)
- Cigarette butts
- Medications



# Lead Poisoning

- Dangers of lead poisoning are well known
- Birds have tendency to chew on objects
- Sources include:
  - Lead paint, cuckoo clock weights, fishing sinkers, shotgun shot/bullets, solder, putty, linoleum, mirror backings, costume jewelry, zippers, unglazed ceramics, foreign made ceramics, wine bottle foil, leaded glass
- Characteristic droppings - hemoglobinuria





# Houseplants

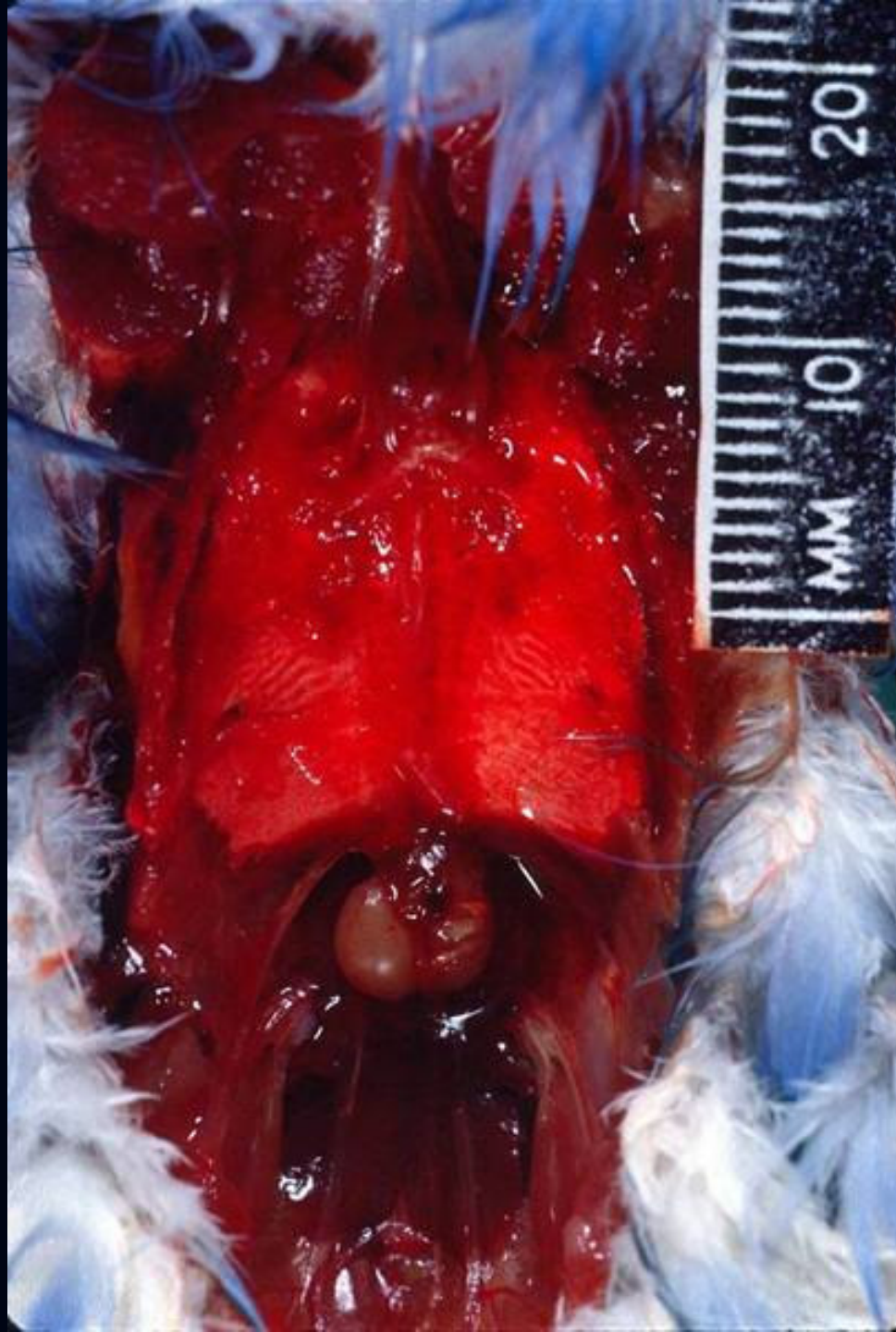
- Birds like to nibble at vegetation so houseplants can be a problem
- Documented cases of actual plant toxicoses in pet birds are rare
  - Rapid transit time through the GI tract
  - Birds tend to shred the vegetation rather than ingest it
  - “Dumb cane” can be a problem
- If potentially toxic plants are in the household, clients should prevent access

# Toxic Fumes

- Due to their small size and efficient respiratory tract birds are very sensitive to airborne toxins
  - Aerosol sprays (propellant)
  - Burning or overheated cooking oil/butter
  - Polymer fumes in spray starch
  - Fumes from self-cleaning oven
  - Paint fumes
  - Smoke from burning food
  - Non-stick plastic sprays (to coat utensils)

# Toxic Fumes

- Toxic fumes (continued)
  - Cigarette smoke
  - Carbon monoxide (car exhaust, water heater, furnace)
  - Natural gas
  - PTFE (Teflon, Silverstone, Supra, other non-stick surfaces)
  - Any material that emits fumes
- If fumes are noted remove bird to area free from fumes and having good ventilation









# Conclusion

- The client education can be completed anytime during the visit but it should be done in a systematic and thorough fashion
- Handouts are necessary for retention of the information
- Properly trained technicians are essential for assistance to complete a complete avian examination

