

Beak and Feather Disease

WHAT IS IT?

Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (Pbfd) is a potentially deadly disease that affects parrots, cockatoos and lorikeets (psittacine birds). It is caused by the highly infectious Beak and Feather Disease (BFD) virus. It is not known to cause disease in humans.

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

Pbfd is present in South Australia and all other states and territories in Australia. The first known outbreak of this disease was reported in wild Red-rumped parrots in the Adelaide Hills in 1888. It may have originated in Australia and is now widespread.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms vary greatly depending on the species and age of bird. The virus may affect the feathers, beak and claw and suppress the immune system.

Pbfd should be considered in any parrot, cockatoo or lorikeet showing abnormal loss, colour or development of feathers. Cockatoos, Galahs and Little corellas may also develop abnormal beaks. The majority of affected birds will eventually die from secondary infections. Pbfd can cause high mortality rates in young birds less than two years old.

WHAT IS AT RISK?

Pbfd does not present a major threat to the conservation of wild parrots, cockatoos and lorikeets unless there are only a few populations or limited numbers of birds, such as the critically endangered Orange-bellied parrot (*Neophema chrysogaster*) and the endangered Swift parrot (*Lathamus discolor*). Pbfd has been recorded in wild birds of both species and its occurrence poses a risk to the survival of these species.

The endangered Glossy black cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus lathami halmaturinus*) is known to be susceptible to Pbfd, but the disease is not known in the small population on Kangaroo Island.

The disease is more prevalent in species that are widespread, such as the Sulphur-crested cockatoo, Little corella and Galah. It is quite common for a flock of these birds to have one or more members visibly affected by Pbfd. The disease is not often found in cockatiels.

HOW DOES Pbfd SPREAD?

The virus remains viable for many years. It is spread from bird to bird in feather dust, droppings, in crop secretions when feeding chicks, and through successive use of the nest hollow or box. Birds can contract the virus at feeding, roosting and watering sites.

Some birds, such as the Rainbow lorikeet, are able to recover from the disease. They become a carrier of the virus and will excrete and spread the virus for the rest of their life.

People that have been in contact with an infected bird can spread the disease through their clothing and hair.



Deformed feathers and lost tail feathers in an Eastern rosella with Pbfd.

Picture: Dr Anne Fowler (SA Veterinary Wildlife Group)

WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF Pbfd?

There is no treatment available for Pbfd and eradication of the disease is not feasible. The preferred management strategy is preventing and slowing down the spread.

Wherever possible, isolate diseased birds to prevent spread of the virus to other healthy birds. Diseased birds may need to be euthanised for the protection of healthy birds, particularly if birds are weak.



Do not release captive parrots, cockatoos and lorikeets into the wild (unless tested for PBF and the test results show that the bird does not carry the BFD virus).

Good hygiene and husbandry of parrots, cockatoos and lorikeets in captivity is essential to protect them and wild birds from PBF and by:

- Placing food and water receptacles away from possible bird droppings.
- Quarantine and monitor any cockatoo, parrot or lorikeet for two months before allowing it to enter your aviary with other parrots, cockatoos and lorikeets, in particular when they are younger than two years. Preferably have the birds tested for PBF
- Clean surfaces of your aviary regularly with soaps and detergent and disinfect with 2% Virkon-S solution if it has held an infected bird.
- Shower and change clothing after handling a bird suspected of having PBF and before getting in close proximity to other cockatoos, parrots and lorikeets.

Report a group of three or more sick or dead wild parrots, cockatoos and/or lorikeets to your local DEWNR office.



The critically endangered Orange-bellied parrot is susceptible to PBF, which may threaten the survival of this species, especially while the wild population is in such perilously low numbers.

Picture: Chris Tzaros

