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Parrots pigment as a way to feather their love nest is just a red herring

Feb. 17, 2005 12:00 AM
Parrots are red to attract mates, right?

Maybe not, says an Arizona State University researcher.

Behavioral ecologist Kevin McGraw has uncovered the chemistry behind the colors of parrots, describing on a molecular level what is responsible for their bright red feathers.



McGraw's work casts a new light on what is chemically responsible for the colors of birds. Details are in a paper published this week in the journal *Biology Letters*.

McGraw said parrots "may not be using color in the classic cases of mate choice or competitive ability." Instead, the pigments may be playing a role

as antioxidants to quench free radicals and protect cells and tissues in the body from oxidative damage.

In other words, the pigments help cleanse the parrot's body and keep the birds healthy, McGraw said.

So quenching free radicals trumps love, McGraw said. Great.

- William Hermann

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