INTRODUCING FORAGING

12 EASY STEPS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ENRICHMENT

A parrot in the wild is a captivating creature to behold. Gregarious, vocal, beautiful, and free-spirited, it is easy to see why we have such a strong desire to make them a part of our families and our lives. The truth of the matter is that many of the parrots in our home are only a generation or two removed from their wild counterparts. They have evolved instincts over countless millennia to be perfectly suited to life in the jungles or on the savannas of South and Central America, Africa, Australia, and the Polynesian Islands. In order for our parrots to be happy and healthy in our homes, we as parrot caregivers need to make allowances for these strongly established natural instincts. When we don’t, we set up the perfect situation for the development of common behaviour problems, such as aggression, excessive screaming, feather destruction/mutilation (picking) and generalized fearfulness (phobias). Dr. Scott Echols, DVM, Dipl ABVP, states that these behaviour problems will be experienced, to some degree, by as many as 80% of companion parrots (AAV Conference, Key note speakers address, Providence, 2007).

An examination of wild parrot behaviour shows us that parrots spend the majority of their day (8-10 hours) in the search for and preparation of food, known as “Foraging”. They must fly long distances in order to find available food sources throughout their ranges. Once found these food sources need to be ripped apart, dug up, rooted out, stripped, and otherwise modified in order to access the tasty morsels inside. Compare that to a pet parrot, with free access to a food dish, usually overloaded, containing calorie/vitamin/mineral rich foods, which can be easily consumed in a 5-minute period. We can see the obvious activity deficit created by the traditional method of feeding our parrots. With nothing else to occupy their time, parrots inevitably resort to their own methods, and this time is often filled with behaviours we find difficult to live with. One way to facilitate this natural instinct is to introduce foraging into your parrot’s life in the home.

The exciting thing about foraging, is that it provides tremendous benefits to our parrots, with very little time or financial expenditure from us. Since the importance of foraging has come to light, countless manufacturers have developed lines of foraging toys for all sizes of companion parrots. Most of these are made of heavy-duty materials and are re-fillable, making them a wise financial investment. It is also important to remember the joy our parrots take from shredding, mutilating, and destroying the materials in their environment. In addition to the indestructible acrylic or metal foraging toys on the market, we also recommend a variety of satisfying and easily destroyed toys you can make in your own home. The following are twelve suggestions that you can quickly employ to provide your parrots with hours of activity and fun. Most of the supplies needed are readily available at your local craft/grocery/toy/hardware stores. Continue to offer your parrot’s regular food in dishes, but watch how readily your parrot becomes willing to work for food,
rather then only approaching the food in the dish. While using favourite treats is a good way to encourage your parrot to engage in foraging, don’t forget that we must provide our parrots with a healthy and balanced diet. Providing too many treats may lead to nutritional deficiencies and obesity. Don’t be afraid to integrate your parrot’s pelleted diet into your foraging program. Once you understand foraging, and experiment with what your parrot enjoys, the possibilities for introducing other foraging methods are endless.

1) **Use your parrots existing environment:** If your parrot is not used to the idea of having to work for their supper, or are afraid of new toys, the easiest way to introduce foraging, is to use your parrots existing environment. Attach food to the bars of your parrot’s cage. Weave bits of dried fruit through the chains of their toys. Hide nuts or pellets inside existing toys. Make sure, at first, that everything is readily visible. As your parrot learns to search their environment for goodies, you can start to be a little more creative in “hiding” the food. Remember, the purpose is not for them to find large caches of food, but a tiny piece here and there. That way, the parrot gets more exercise and activity without becoming quickly sated.

2) **Veggie Kebabs:** Instead of offering healthy veggies cut up in a dish, hang large chunks on a bird safe skewer from the top of the cage. It is much more challenging to work at food that dangles and swings then food that sits in a dish. The large chunks will allow your parrot to use their beak for what it was meant for – shredding and cracking. You can also string whole heads of washed greens around the cage. Dark green leafy vegetables are a high source of calcium and vitamin A, and spritzing them with water will encourage even the most reluctant bather to rub up against them to bathe.

3) **The Food Dish:** Even your parrot’s regular food dish can be made into a foraging center. Using multiple dishes around the cage with smaller amounts of food encourages your parrot to move around their environment. The dish itself can become a foraging station in one of two ways. You can cover the dish with tissue paper and place it back in the holder with a hole punched in the paper so that the parrot can see the food, (the idea being that the parrot has to tear through the paper to get at the food). With this method, you would gradually make the hole smaller and smaller until there is no hole at all. The other way is to start with a small piece of paper inside the dish, over the food. At this stage, the parrot only has to move the paper aside to get at the food. You then gradually make the paper bigger and bigger until it covers the whole dish, and requires the parrot to chew through to get at the food. You can then use heavier duty paper and multiple layers to make the activity more of a challenge for your parrot.

4) **Diggers and Ground Foragers:** You can fill a dish or small plastic/stainless steel bucket with large beads (plastic or unfinished wood) or clean stones that are too large to swallow (large unused aquarium gravel works well), and a few pieces of food. Your bird will spend hours digging through to try and find the morsels. Alternately, you can place a tray on the bottom of your parrot’s cage with a mirror lying flat on it. Liberally sprinkle beads or rocks on the mirror, and a few pellets. Many of our companion parrots naturally forage on the ground in the wild, so this is a great way to provide environmental enrichment for these birds. This technique works well for the smallest budgie, to the largest macaw.

5) **Birdie Bon-Bons:** Take regular pellets or treats and wrap them in other materials to make them more difficult to get at. Unbleached coffee filters, unused coin rollers, paper Dixie cups (no wax), newsprint, construction paper, and, for a festive mood, wrapping paper (non-shiny) are all good options for this. Tie them around the cage or place them in your parrot’s food dish for an extra challenge.
6) **Treat Boxes**: Fill empty cereal boxes or un-dyed/un-varnished wicker baskets with shredded paper, dried corn husks, hay, unused popsicle sticks, small toys, and other materials, as well as bits of food. Your bird will spend hours pulling apart and shredding the various materials looking for food. Avoid any materials that have adhesives on them, as these may contain lead or zinc salts.

7) **Hidden Treasures**: Place bits of food throughout the pages of an old phone book or newspaper. This can be placed on the floor of the cage, on a shelf, or securely attached to the bars of the cage.

8) **Lettuce Fajitas**: Wrap our soft food recipe (cooked rice, pellets, corn, beans, frozen veggies) in a lettuce leaf, and attach to the side of the cage.

9) **Pomegranate Halves**: Place a half of a pomegranate in a dish in your bird’s cage. Your bird will have hours of fun trying to get out each little seed. Provided you aren’t concerned with the mess, pomegranates are chocked full of vitamins and anti-oxidants. You can also to this with whole ears of corn.

10) **Birdie Wishing Well**: Suspend a plastic or stainless steel bucket from a chain in your cage so that the bucket hangs below your parrot’s favourite perch. Place a few pieces of food in there, and watch as your bird tries to figure out how to raise the bucket to get the treat. This technique is particularly effective for birds that are advanced problem solvers.

11) **Stacking Cups**: Using a child’s set of stacking plastic cups or a stack of measuring cups, hide a pellet or treat under each level. Many plastic toys suitable for young toddlers make excellent toys for birds. Avoid painted wood, or toys with easily breakable parts.

12) **Don’t forget the Play Stand**: All of the above activities will not only help your parrot entertain himself while alone in his cage, but also makes time out with the family extra exciting if we include them on a play stand or gym.

Our parrots are incredibly intelligent creatures, and it is easy to see how the frustration caused by boredom can result in normally natural behaviours becoming all-consuming and abnormal obsessions. Normal preening becomes feather and skin mutilation. The occasional squawk becomes high-decibel, long duration screaming that rattles the rafters and causes your neighbours to put up “For Sale” signs. Pent-up energy can turn a small nip into a deep gash that requires stitches. With little opportunity for exploration and discovery, parrots can become easily frightened by new things. Research shows us that animals that live with these high stress levels may be more prone to various disease processes, and a general weakening of the immune system. Introducing foraging into your parrot’s daily routine is a simple way to enrich their lives and decrease the likelihood that these behaviour problems will surface. With minimal effort, the joy of owning a happy, healthy parrot makes it well worth the time.

For more information on introducing foraging to your parrot, check out these wonderful sources:


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