

# FORAGING FOR PARROTS

## INTRODUCTION

Foraging is a natural behavior performed by animals, including parrots, as they search for (dig, scratch, chew, shred) and manipulate their food items. This behavior takes up a good portion of time and, in wild parrots, depending on the species and season, foraging can make up 40-75% of their day time activities. For companion parrots, with their easy access to food and water dishes, the time spent searching for and manipulating food is far less, typically only 30-60 minutes of their day. With so much time left in the day, our birds need to find other behaviors in which to engage. Unfortunately, parrots do not always have the opportunity to fill this extra time with meaningful activities. Moreover, the lack of foraging opportunities prevents parrots from displaying a species-typical behavior that birds innately want to perform, much like a cat hunting for prey even when it is fed sufficient food. Abnormal behaviors such as feather destruction, repetitive behaviors, and even excessive reproductive behaviors may occur as a result. Encouraging foraging behaviors at home offers a great opportunity for parrots to display their normal behavioral repertoire; in addition, it helps to prevent and treat problem behaviors, thereby enriching and improving the welfare of our feathered companions. Foraging also has the added benefits of increasing activity, providing great mental stimulation and alleviating stress and boredom.

## INTRODUCING FORAGING AT HOME:

There are various ways to incorporate foraging into the daily routine of pet birds, with some opportunities “coming naturally” and others needing to be taught.

Simple ways to provide foraging that require little teaching include:

- Increasing the size of pellets or offering larger-sized food items that birds need to break down into smaller pieces
- Cutting known food items into new and exciting shapes and trying to offer a variety of foods with different colors, textures, and tastes
- Spreading out the daily ration of food across multiple bowls that are placed in different locations
- Placing toys in (larger-sized) feeding bowls or mixing food with safe inedible items; pellets or seeds can be mixed with large wooden beads or blocks, cork, shredded paper, or buttons so that the bird must dig through the bowl to find its food
- Stuff corrugated cardboard with small food items that a bird has to peel apart to remove the items
- For parrots that like to forage on the ground (especially cockatiels, cockatoos, and African grey parrots), placing an artificial grass mat on the cage bottom and scattering food on that is a great way to encourage foraging. Make sure to keep the mat clean and that your bird is not trying to eat the mat!



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More complex foraging that may require more involved teaching from the owner to ensure success. Examples include:

- Commercially sold puzzle toys designed for foraging
- Searching for food items hidden throughout an enclosure or a room where the parrot can safely roam around
- Covering or wrapping the food bowl(s) or food items so that the bird has to chew these to get to its food. Here are a few examples:
  - Try covering the bird's food dish with an easily moveable barrier (e.g. a small piece of paper). All the bird has to do is pick it up, or flap a wing, to move it out of the way. Once the bird is successful with moving the paper or getting the food around it, you can try adding another piece of paper to the food dish so that it is more difficult to remove (i.e. wrapping the paper completely around the food dish). Advanced foragers can work their way up to a bowl of shredded or crinkled paper where they can't even see the food inside!
  - Take pieces of food, wrap them up into small pieces of paper towel, tissue, or newspaper and then put these in the food dish. This foraging technique can be made very easy by tearing a small hole in the paper so that the bird has a head start. For advanced foragers, try wrapping food without any tears in the paper, and using thicker paper or a few layers of paper to wrap the food.
  - Hanging those balled-up pieces of paper from bird safe leather strips, clipping to the side of the cage near the food dish, placing inside other foraging toys/cups, and wedging in between cage bars are a few great ways to add variety to foraging. Be cautious that the leather strips are not so long that the bird could get tangled or stuck.
  - Small boxes, toilet paper rolls, egg cartons, and packaging paper are just a few examples of items that can be made into fun foraging toys for our birds. You can make foraging toys out of bird-safe, store-bought materials easily with coffee filters, cupcake wrappers, Dixie cups, finger trap toys, and wood blocks, just to name a few!



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Conveniently, there are many reusable foraging toys currently on the market. They come in various shapes, sizes, colors and levels of complexity.

An important concept when working with our feathered friends is that most birds learn best when they are repeatedly successful with food rewards. Many can become frustrated and unwilling to keep trying if they repeatedly fail when attempting a new toy or puzzle. So be sure to start simple and gradually increase the difficulty level to keep your bird engaged and motivated! Examples of how to start simple with some of the more advanced, commercially available devices are described below:

- Place food items at the level (for items with multiple levels) and/or position (for items that need to be turned) where they will drop out of the device when the bird interacts with it correctly and gradually change the position and/or add an extra level once the bird is able to get the food out
- Leave drawers/doors open with food or treats easily accessible before gradually closing them for the bird
- Put food only partially in a puzzle to make the chances of successful manipulation easier in the beginning

## But My Bird Can't Figure Out How to Forage!

To some birds, a simple single piece of food wrapped in paper may be challenging to find, while other birds find it immediately. Every bird is different! By using approximations, i.e. breaking the foraging task into single, easily attainable steps, we can help our birds become successful with this challenging but rewarding (and fun!) problem.

1. A first step is to place a small piece of favorite food on top of a foraging paper. When your bird is easily able to grab and eat the food item repeatedly, you are ready for the next step.
2. The wrapper can now be closed slightly, not completely covering the reward, and placed into the cage. You may also try wrapping the item and then making a large tear in the paper to give them a head start. When this item is being eaten readily you can go the next step.
3. Now wrap the reward in a small piece of paper so that is cannot be seen by your bird. Place this wrapped item back in the cage and see what happens. Some birds still may have trouble - if this is the case, make a very small hole in the wrapper.
4. When these wrapped foraging items are accepted, you can then place them around your bird's enclosure.



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## Tips for Success

Parrots are extremely intelligent and will become bored if they have the same foraging devices all the time. Once a bird seems to be comfortable with a foraging device or is quickly figuring it out, switch it out for something new and complex. Unless your bird is frightened of new things, changing things up often will keep foraging interesting for your companion.

To give your bird(s) a little extra motivation, teach new foraging concepts using highly favored treats!

Prepare homemade foraging devices ahead of time. Busy owners can dedicate one day a week or time while watching a TV show to sit down to make toys out of boxes and items they have saved for their birds to destroy. Being prepared means an owner can quickly put a fun new foraging toy in the cage for the bird to enjoy while they are out for the day.

Make sure to always use bird safe materials: you know your bird best so if you suspect a toy might be unsafe for your bird (for example, they might get stuck or might ingest it) don't use it. Do not use materials that might be toxic. If you are unsure if a certain foraging toy is safe or have any questions about if foraging is right for your bird, consult your avian veterinarian.

Don't stop here! Create a foraging tree so that a bird has to work around various branches to get items; there is an instructional video on this available for free at <https://www.avianstudios.com/captive-foraging-dvd/>. Adding foragers and shredders to any play stand or tree perch is a great way to enrich and enhance your birds' play areas.

Simulating foraging in captivity should be a fun experience for the bird and owner alike. The limit is your own imagination!

## AAV: Setting a Standard in Avian Care Since 1980

Avian medicine is a distinct and very specialized field that requires extensive training, advanced skills, and facilities specifically designed and equipped to treat and hospitalize birds. The Association of Avian Veterinarians was established to provide veterinarians with this special education, and to keep them up to date with the latest information on bird health. The AAV holds an annual conference on avian medicine and publishes the peer-reviewed *Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery*. AAV also makes annual contributions toward avian conservation and sponsors studies advancing the understanding of avian medicine.

## For More Information

For more information on birds, ask your veterinarian for copies of the following AAV Client Education Brochures:

- Avian Chlamydiosis and Psittacosis
- Veterinary Care for Your Pet Bird\*
- Basic Care for Companion Birds\*
- Behavior: Normal and Abnormal
- Caring for Backyard Chickens
- Caring for Ducks
- Digital Scales
- Feather Loss
- Feeding Birds
- Foraging for Parrots
- Injury Prevention and Emergency Care
- Managing Chronic Egg-laying in Your Pet Bird
- Signs of Illness in Companion Birds\*
- Ultraviolet Lighting for Companion Birds
- When Should I Take My Bird to a Veterinarian?\*
- Zoonotic Diseases in Backyard Poultry\*

*\*Available in multiple languages. All others are available in English only at this time.*

## Online Resources

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