

Foraging Behavior in Companion Parrots: Behavioral and Environmental Enrichment

The Importance of Foraging

In the wild, parrots exhibit four main behaviors: social interaction, grooming, foraging, and sleeping. The vast majority of their days are spent foraging or searching for food.

Food is readily available for pet birds, and a feeding process that should take hours, may take only minutes in the caged bird. Left with little to fill their days, some birds turn to excessive preening, which in turn can lead to feather destructive behavior. Foraging behavior provides pet birds with much needed physical and mental stimulation.

Teaching Companion Parrots to Forage

Foraging appears to be a learned behavior that must be gradually encouraged in our companion parrots. Start slowly. Make food items easy to find at first, and then gradually work towards more complicated and challenging methods.

(1) Multiple food stations

Provide several bowls of food in the cage at various levels. Place a small amount of food in each dish, and ideally place different food items in each dish. Also try offering food outside of dishes. Weave items through cage bars or wedge chunks between bar spaces. To decrease the predictability of feeding time, food should not necessarily be present at each station.

(2) Conceal food items

Once your bird is used to different feeding stations, try hiding food from view

- a) Begin by **covering** food bowls with a piece of paper or cardboard. Initially, poke holes in the cover so your bird can see food in the dish. Then gradually cover the bowl in such a manner that it is more and more difficult to obtain food. Ultimately secure the cover to the bowl with masking tape.
- b) Food can also be **hidden** in crumpled paper cups, twisted corn husks, cardboard paper rolls, PVC piping with holes, and wooden tubes. (*Select non-toxic wood that has not been sprayed with pesticides*).
- c) **Wrap** food in large lettuce leaves or coffee filters. Slowly make food more difficult to access by twisting or fastening ends together with cotton rope or masking tape. Also, tuck wrapped items between cage bars or hang with clips.
- d) Food can also be **mixed** with inedible food items.

(3) Increase feeding time

Increase feeding time by offering veggies, ice blocks, or whole food items.

(4) Commercially-available puzzle toys

Puzzle toys, like puzzle boxes, kabob skewers & piñatas, also encourage foraging.

(5) Foraging trees

Foraging trees are an excellent way to encourage foraging behavior. Foraging trees must be constructed from large tree branches. Secure dishes or platforms at multiple levels, and vary the location of food to encourage true foraging behavior.

Tips for Success

- Use your imagination to make foraging fun, but always put safety first. If you are uncertain about the safety of an item, consult your avian veterinarian. And always monitor your bird when offering a whole food or when introducing any new item.
- Start slowly and make food items easy to find at first. Gradually increase the level of difficulty and complexity.
- Allow your bird to observe you hiding food to stimulate curiosity and foraging.
- Monitor your bird's progress. It may help, especially at first, to demonstrate where food is located and how to find it.
- Be persistent! Pet birds often require repeated encouragement until foraging becomes a way of life, and many hand-raised birds will give up relatively easily when they cannot find food right away.
- Check out the DVD on Captive Foraging by Dr. Scott Echols (*see below*) for additional valuable tips and visual aids on teaching foraging behavior.

References

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