



Foraging: The Lost Behavior

In the wild, birds must fend for themselves. These daily accomplishments help them gain confidence and independence and also occupies a substantial amount of time. For a wild parrot, about 6 hours are spent finding, procuring, and eating food. Another 3 hours are spent flying to or from roosting areas, checking out nest sites, interacting with flock-mates, etc. About 3 hours are spent on feather maintenance. The last 12 hours a day is spent sleeping.

Contrast this pattern with a pet bird. First, many are kept awake for 16-18 hours daily. Second, we have taken away flight, a large

part of the flock interactions, and nesting behaviors. Finally, we give them a large amount of food in a bowl that is easily accessible. They can get all of their caloric needs filled in about 30-45 minutes. What remains is 9-11 hours to groom, which is why many birds become overly obsessed with feather maintenance.

We need to give birds something more productive to do with their time. By providing foraging opportunities you can encourage your bird to develop into a confident, independent bird that is

less likely to feather pick or develop other behavioral disorders.

It is important to assure that your bird is healthy prior to starting a foraging program. Having a thorough physical exam by your veterinarian will help assure there are no underlying health issues to address. Foraging is safe for any bird, but restricting access to food could be hazardous for certain situations, including birds that are underweight, have physical or neurologic disorders, are recovering from illness, have poor appetite, are very young, or recently acquired birds.

TECHNIQUES FOR ENCOURAGING FORAGING

Wait until your bird is mastering one step before moving to a more challenging step.

Step 1: Reduce the total amount of food to just what your bird finishes in a day. Measure the food before putting it in the dish. Then in 24 hours measure what is left. If there is no food after 24 hours, give a little more the next day. If there is some food remaining reduce the food.

Step 2: Divide the food. Get 5-10 smaller dishes (preferably ones that fit in a ring holder). Initially put most in the original dish, and just a sprinkle in each of the others. Once your bird is eating from all of the dishes, start to

divide the food more evenly between them.

Step 3: Mix in some non-edible materials as distracters. Some choices would be wooden beads (large enough the bird cannot swallow them), paper litter (i.e. CareFresh or Yesterday's News) or paper scraps. Initially just put a few in each dish. Gradually add more so your bird has to carefully sort through to separate food from debris.

Step 4: Cover the dishes. Take a paper towel and put it over the dish and tuck into the ring holder. If there is no ring, a rubber band can be used. Now your bird has to chew open the dish, then sort through the distracters to find the food.

Step 5: Wrap individual food items. Take a few food items and put in a small piece of paper and twist the ends. Place these in the dish with the other food items and the distracters.

Step 6: More advanced techniques to challenge your bird. Try hiding a few of your bird's favorite foods on or in other toys. Put a food nugget in a paper cup and then roll the top of the cup around a cage bar. Hang a food item at the end of a string so the bird has to pull it up (or snip the string to let it drop). Try puzzle toys or a foraging tree. Set up a stand or tree with lots of little spots to hide food and put food in some but not all of the spots.