

Prevent Bird Boredom

These tips will keep your bird entertained -- and your home furnishings safe

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Bored birds may turn to your furniture if they are tired of playing with their toys.

A way to prevent your furniture and woodwork from becoming a work of customized bird art is to provide your pet bird with plenty of entertaining toys and objects to chew on. Try these ideas out to keep your bird from boredom.

Foraging Tree

Avian veterinarian Scott Echols made the concept of playgyms much more interesting with the idea of "the foraging tree." This concept might keep a wandering cockatoo in one place, at least for a little while. In addition to the usual toys, he hangs multiple foraging devices on his cockatoo tree, giving these super-intelligent birds multiple problems to solve. This configuration is much more interesting than a toy alone and could be helpful in keeping those wandering "chain saws" on their playgyms for longer periods — like 10 minutes instead of three!

I have found this concept to be useful with my macaw, Sam, as well, because the possibility of food keeps her "glued" to her tree, even when reproductive hormones rage. She has a metal treat cage on her tree. The other day, I put a very large walnut in it. I was tickled to see that this particular nut kept her totally involved for several visits to the tree. She hung upside-down from the cage, trying valiantly to break the nut through the treat cage's bars. Hard work, that!

Home Work

Dr. Echols and toy maker Kit Manchester put their creative heads together and came up with a variety of excellent ideas offered on www.birdsjustwannahavefun.com. Ideas include:

The Wrap: Place a treat in a paper cup, paper towel, empty envelope, coffee filter or other nontoxic item, and close it by twisting or crushing the container. Then you can punch a hole in it, and hang it in the cage, or hang it on a skewer. For more difficulty, the wrap can be offered as a foot toy or hidden around a parrot's cage. In her BIRD TALK article on food toys (September 2002), Chris Davis used this same idea but with tortillas.

The Cover: This is an excellent technique for the beginner forager. Place a paper towel on top of the bird's treat bowl so that all it has to do is pull it off to get to the reward. Once the bird is doing that without hesitation, go a step further. Use masking tape to tape the paper towel to the edge of the bowl so now the parrot has to tear through the paper to get to its treat.

An excellent variation of this is avian veterinarian Evelyn Ivey's "Popsicle Sticks." Lay one or two popsicle sticks (or tongue depressors) on top of your parrot's food bowl. Once it flings them off, quickly tape them down with masking tape but leave space between so your bird can still see its food. Add more and more popsicle sticks as it gets accustomed to this game, until it has to happily splinter its way through a solid layer of popsicle sticks to get to the treats.

Pebbles & Seed: This is the invention of veterinary ethologist Andrew Luescher. Fill a bowl with appropriately sized, well-scrubbed pebbles (large enough that a parrot cannot swallow them and small enough that it can move them around). Sprinkle a couple of teaspoons of small treats over the rocks, and jiggle the bowl to get the tiny morsels to drop below the pebbles. My Sam loves this game and will spend as long as an hour chuckling to herself while she rummages around in the metal baking dish, trying valiantly to find all the precious sunflower seeds she saw me bury there.

Cups & Plates: Bonnie Kenk and Karen Webster, both of the Parrot Education & Adoption Center (PEAC), collaborated to come up with this one. Spear a small paper cup on a parrot skewer, then a small paper plate, then another paper cup and a coffee filter, etc. Food treats hidden in the paper cups make it a foraging toy.

Parrot See, Parrot Do: Give your bird a glimpse of what treat awaits it. For instance, my Sam has a treat cup that hangs from her tree at the end of a 3-foot chain. She has to pull up the chain, open the lid and balance on one hock while she reaches in to get her prize. She is very good at this and reels in the cup multiple times per day, whether it contains a treat or not. Once, I wrapped the treat in a tissue inside the cup, and this stopped her cold. She did not appear to realize that there was a treat inside the paper. I had to offer her tissue-wrapped nuts a couple of times before she caught on to the hidden treat in the cup.