

Destructive Pet Bird Behavior: From Home Wrecker To Home Respector

Redirect your pet parrot's destructive behavior with toys, a playstand and foraging opportunities.

By Liz Wilson, CVT

A parrot's desire to chew can be redirected to acceptable items to chew, such as toys, paper and wood.

Andy is a 3-year-old green-winged macaw that's in deep trouble. His adoring owner, Kathy, just discovered Andy's custom work on her beloved great-aunt Martha's antique desk.

Despite the emotional value of the piece of furniture, had Andy actually done anything wrong? No. Full responsibility for the damage rested not with Andy but with Kathy's lack of supervision and redirection.

I am frequently asked how to teach parrots not to chew on woodwork and furniture, and my answer is always the same — can't be done. Parrots chew instinctively. They are nature's composters and, unlike puppies, do not outgrow this behavior. Indeed, apparently one technique for locating favored psittacine roosts in the wild is to look for detritus on the ground. Parrots chew — period.

Therefore, the title of this article is misleading. It is futile to train parrots to respect your home and your possessions. Instead, we need a two-pronged approach. First, we need to closely supervise parrots while they are out of their cages so they can't access things we do not wish destroyed; after all, we would never allow a toddler to wander about without supervision, and the same is true of pet birds. Second, parrot people need to redirect this hard-wired chewing behavior to objects other than beloved pieces of furniture, and this is easier than you might think.

Provide A Playstand For Your Pet Bird

Probably the easiest way to properly supervise a parrot is to have a portable playstand to move your pet bird with you as you go through the house. Another alternative is to have playstands in each of the rooms you and your pet bird spend the most time. Rather than "chaining" you and your [et bird to the one room where a playstand is located, this allows more flexibility.

The success of a playgym depends not on how interesting you think it is, but on how interesting your parrot thinks it is. One client did not understand why her Eclectus parrot kept leaving her T-stand and flying back to her cage. The mystery was solved when I pointed out that the Eclectus parrot had nothing to do on the T-stand, and her cage, on the other hand, was loaded with wonderful pet bird toys.

To maintain high interest, playstand toys need to be rotated as frequently as cage toys. Once a week, remove one toy and replace it with a toy your parrot has not seen in a couple of weeks. Toys can be rotated between cage and playstand as well, because play styles vary between these locations.

Pay attention to how long your pet bird is happy on its playstand. If your bird tends to climb down and wander, time how long it takes it to leave its perch. If your parrot climbs down after 15 minutes on its playgym, then move it someplace else after 10 minutes. Don't expect it to stay in one place when it is obvious your pet bird is bored. These intelligent creatures have limited attention spans, and once they become uninterested in a location, they rarely remain stationary.

Seasonal variations, as well as species variations, affect playstand choice. My blue-and-gold macaw, Sam, is normally (finally, after all these years!) quite sedentary in her old age, content to sit for hours on her "tree" in the living room. She has a ridiculous variety of toys there, as well as a window from which to watch and yell at the neighborhood kids. When she becomes awash with reproductive hormones from November to January, however, her priorities shift. Restlessly driven to create a nest, she becomes appallingly destructive if unsupervised for more than a minute or two. Consequently, if I have looming deadlines and cannot supervise her as closely as she needs, she stays in her cage more. This is not a problem; she enjoys her cage immensely and frequently returns to it on her own.

Conversely, cockatoos are notoriously difficult to keep on a playstand. Most are totally comfortable going on a "walkabout" through the house, often accomplishing breathtaking demolition as they wander. Aviculturist Phoebe Linden noted that many cockatoos enjoy horizontal space in which to play. Attaching two playstands together with a board could help provide this. Depending on the circumstance, placing different cages in various rooms would benefit cockatoos by providing a change of scenery without constant monitoring.

Another alternative is the “foraging tree,” so-called by inventor Scott Echols, a board-certified avian veterinarian. A foraging tree provides a good deal more than just toys for play.

Provide Your Pet Bird With Acceptable Things To Chew

Toothpick and splinter production are natural parrot behaviors, so we need to provide interesting fodder for their beaks. This will help prevent — but not eliminate — furniture-chewing. Adequate supervision is still necessary whenever a parrot is out of its cage.

For large parrots (with large beaks), chunks of 2-by-4s stuck between cage bars work nicely. Drill holes in them, and hang them from pieces of safe rawhide. Branches from safe trees (nontoxic, unsprayed and complete with bark and leaves) provide endless joy for some parrots. Other wonderfully chewable objects include corks, balsa wood, old phone books, folded newspapers (black and white only) and greens woven through cage bars. Paper towels tied around toys (Mattie Sue Athan makes “Paper towel bows”) and entire rolls of adding-machine paper can provide hours of happy destruction.

For small pet birds, those annoying tear strips from dot matrix printer paper are apparently fascinating. All sizes of parrots enjoy shredding envelopes from junk mail! In addition, plastic straws and bathroom-sized paper cups can be terrific shredable toys. Years ago, one of my boarding clients introduced me to the toy-making wonders of those parrot-style skewers. He skewered an empty cereal box and hung it in his macaw’s cage, providing hours of happy destruction.

Placing shredable stuff in boxes or on the bottom of the cage is not recommended for sexually mature parrots. Such materials may encourage rampant nest-making with all its accessory problems. However, hanging such items near the top of the cage may not trigger a reproductive hormone response.

The Importance Of Foraging For Pet Birds & Parrots

“Foraging” is defined as searching for and finding food. According to Koutsos, Matson and Klasing in their article “Nutrition Of Birds In The Order Psittaciformes: A Review” (Journal of Avian Medicine and Surgery, 2001), wild parrots spend more than half of their waking hours foraging and eating. In her landmark studies with Amazon parrots at UC Davis, ethologist Cheryl Meehan found that foraging was even more important than play.

Your Pet Bird Has Gotta' Forage!

With a food bowl “under their noses,” companion parrots are likely to find life in captivity to be excruciatingly boring, and that boredom is likely to increase problem behaviors like feather destruction and screaming. Life is too easy! As a result, many bird behaviorists now strongly recommend providing foraging opportunities for our pet birds in order to maintain good mental health. In providing foraging opportunities for my old macaw, I have even more respect for her intelligence, and watching her analyze and solve problems gives me fascinating insights into how her mind seems to work. She and I both enjoy the challenge. I try to out-fox her, and she frequently out-foxes me in return!

Parrots will work for things they value, as long as they do not also get those items without effort. For example, if Sam has unlimited nuts in her treat bowl, why should she work for nuts? Being highly food-motivated, there are many things she values, such as sunflower seeds, small pieces of nuts, bits of cereal, etc.

To learn foraging in the home environment, the first step is to teach the pet bird that a treat might be there, even if it can't see it. This takes a bit of patience, but it is immensely rewarding. Start very slowly, making things more complex as your parrot catches on to the game.

Sam and I have been foraging together for awhile now and, while her pellets are always within easy reach in her food bowl, she no longer gets treats without working for them. In the future, I might gradually increase her foraging opportunities to include pellets and fresh foods, too. Keep in mind that parrots can be neophobic (afraid of new things), so introduce new items slowly. Foraging should be challenging and fun, not terrifying.