

Parrot Food Games

Do birds waste food on purpose or is it a natural behavior of parrots in the wild?

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Q: Sometimes my bird eats part of a nut and then drops it. Later he goes to the bottom of the cage and finishes it. My mother's bird tosses everything in the water dish and doesn't seem to eat it later. I've even heard that some birds hide food around the cage.

Courtesy Maryann Fischer, Michigan

Cut back on wasted food by feeding your bird smaller food portions several times a day.

This seems like odd behavior in a pet that has plenty of access to food. Also, birds drop a lot of food from their mouths while eating. Do they mean to? It seems like they're wasting a lot of it. Why do birds play with their food?

A: Wasteful eating habits seem the norm with our companion parrots, and why not? They don't have to pay for their chow, nor are they responsible for cleaning up their rooms.

My dear friend and colleague Chris Davis tells a wonderful fable (which I have embellished a tad) about the Good Lord creating the rain forest:

When He finished making all the trees and the plants, the little animals on the ground filed a serious complaint, alleging blatant height discrimination. After all, there were luscious foods growing in the top of the rain forest canopy, but how were terrestrial critters to partake of them? They could not fly like birds or climb like their arboreal cousins. As a component of the out-of-court settlement, the Good Lord made the parrot.

The parrot was charged to take one or two bites out of everything that it ate, and then drop the rest to the hungry earthbound creatures below – thus avoiding further litigation. (The Good Lord was pleased to find that in doing so, the parrot also helped propagate next year's food crop.)

So, says Chris, when your parrot cheerfully lobs food around your living room and glues your books shut with sticky fruit juice, it is only doing the Lord's work. As the commentator stated in the PBS program *Nature: Jaguar – The Year of the Cat*, "In the forest, food distribution often follows a vertical path."

Do Parrots Waste Food?

Fables notwithstanding, excessive food wasting seems an inherent parrot behavior, meaning that you will never teach your parrot to be neat and thrifty with the groceries. Some strategic tactics, however, might help. For instance, cutting food into smaller pieces might decrease the volume of victuals unceremoniously dumped on the floor. If your schedule permits, feeding smaller portions several times a day also can help.

Soaking food in water bowls is also a parrot thing; hence, all the jokes about "parrot soup." We don't know why they do this, but the raccoon-like behavior can cause problems if food-contaminated water sits for hours while we are at work (earning money to buy food for parrots to fling). Bacterial overgrowth happens quickly, creating a potential source of illness for the bird. For instance, *Pseudomonas* is a water-borne bacteria and a common source of illness in parrots.

To judge if you have a potential problem with water contamination, run your finger around the inside of the cup prior to cleaning it. Any slime is evidence of exponential bacterial growth and a potential source of health problems. If you cannot change the water often, consider switching your bird to a water bottle and blocking its concoctions of primordial stew in your absence.

Macaws are famous for making soup with their food, and my blue-and-gold macaw Sam is no exception. She enjoyed soaking her pellets tremendously, so I felt guilty about ending the behavior for health reasons. Shortly after teaching her to use a water bottle though, I was tickled to see her get a mouthful of dry pellets, then methodically add water to her mouth from the bottle.

Incidentally, I have seen Internet messages to the effect that it is cruel to replace water bowls with bottles. Parrots enjoy soaking their food and bathing in their water bowls, so the online writers believe that those bird behaviors shouldn't be blocked. This response surprises me, because forcing parrots to drink and bathe in polluted water seems cruel. This

practice could be detrimental to a parrot's health, and bathing in contaminated water would make clean feathers, an impossibility, possibly predisposing a parrot to feather destruction.

Parrots scouring the bottom of the cage to eat previously dropped food might be a manifestation of foraging, which appears to be an instinctive behavior. Hiding food around the cage might be a foraging game, too, and a healthy activity for an intelligent animal like a parrot.

The Clark's nutcracker, a relative of crows and jays, is reputed to have the best memory of all the 9,000-plus bird species. To survive the bitter winters of Idaho, Montana and western Canada, they stash thousands and thousands of acorns during fall months.

Astonishingly, they remember the location of a huge percentage of them, despite major landscape changes such as deep snow. Foraging appears to be a method of survival.

On the other hand, not all parrots are wasteful when it comes to food. My Sam is cautious with foods that she adores, such as pasta and nuts. When she is eating beloved treats, she is shrewd enough to eat them over a bowl so she doesn't lose a molecule.

The real reason that parrots play with food is obvious. Why not? They play with everything else!