

Games Birds Play

Get your bird moving with these fun games you both can play

By Rebecca Sweat

Bond with your bird playing fun games, like Hide-And-Seek, every day. Courtesy Anne Thigpen, Louisiana

What follows are the instructions for some vigorous games you can play with your feathered buddy to help burn up some excess calories. All games include a verbal command to say at the start of the game, which lets your bird know it's game time. Not every parrot will want to play every game on this list, but certainly there are at least a few games here that will motivate your bird to get off the perch and get moving:

Fetch & Retrieve

Some parrots will play fetch in a similar fashion to dogs. To play, gently toss a small Koosh ball, bauble or a soft, lightweight toy in the direction of your parrot, and say, "Catch it!" If you're lucky, your bird will run after the object and pick it up with its beak. If this happens, say, "Good bird!"

Next step: teach your bird to bring the object back to you. Keep throwing the ball toward your bird until it gets the idea that it is supposed to bring the ball back to you. When your bird finally does, say, "Great job" in a happy, excited tone of voice, and scratch it on the head. That alone should motivate your bird to bring the toy back to you next time you toss it. Your bird will get lots of exercise catching the toy and carting it back to you.

Staircase Dash

You will need two people to play this game and a carpeted staircase. If your parrot has a favorite person, get that person to play. The favorite person should stand at the bottom of the stairs while the other person places the bird at the top of the stairs and gently nudges the parrot to move downward. The favorite person calls the bird's name or says "Climb down the stairs!" The bird will normally climb down the stairs, using its feet and flapping its wings, getting lots of exercise. Once it reaches the bottom, say, "Great job!"

The favorite person then puts the parrot down, quickly walks up the stairs and calls the parrot. Most birds will immediately start chasing after "their" human. When the bird reaches the top, praise it again. "Obviously, in order for this to work, you have to have a good relationship with your bird," Karras noted. "If your parrot doesn't like you, he's not going to chase after you or walk toward you."

"I'm Going To Get Your Tail!"

Set your parrot on your bed, put your hand near its tail (but don't actually touch it), and then, in a very animated tone of voice, say, "Oh, I'm going to touch your tail!" Your bird will run the other direction from you and then all over your bed. Let your bird rest, then you can do it again.

You don't want the bird to establish your bed as its territory, so to end this game, Karras suggests offering a braided rope or tug-toy dog rope to climb on. Say, "Get on the rope!" When the bird grabs onto the rope with its beak, gently swing bird and rope back and forth as your bird flaps its wings. Then you can take your bird back to its cage or playstand to rest. Note: Don't play this game if your bird has trust issues or doesn't appear to be comfortable.

Birdie Basketball

Teach your parrot to play basketball using a birdie-sized basketball hoop. Buy one of the basketball games designed especially for parrots or the miniature-sized basketball hoops many toy stores carry for small children. These have a suction cup on the back of the hoop to attach to a wall, and they come with a small cloth ball or Nerf basketball. Either kind will work.

Set the hoop up on the floor, next to a wall. Show your bird the basketball, say "Toss!" and then put the basketball through the hoop. Then, hand the ball to your bird and say, "Toss!" If your bird puts the ball through the hoop, say, "Good job!" in an excited, happy tone.

If your bird just ignores the ball, try putting it through the hoop several more times. Chances are, your bird will figure out what to do.

Let's Fly

Gently hold both your bird's feet (with your fingers holding down its toes) and say "Ready, set, go!" as you calmly lift your arm up above your head (don't do this in a rapid, jerky movement). As your bird moves upwards, it will flap its wings. Keep the bird above your head for several seconds or for as long as it continues to flap. Then bring it down to your chest level again. Do this several times or as many times as you believe your bird enjoys it.

Climb The Rope

Get a heavy cotton or sisal rope about 8 or 9 feet long, and make knots in it about every 6 inches. Hang the rope from the ceiling using a plant hook. Put your parrot on the floor at the bottom end of the rope and say, "Climb the rope!"

Many parrots will naturally want to get on the rope and start climbing upward. If yours doesn't, coax it to the top by holding a treat (such as a piece of broccoli, a sunflower or safflower seed, or a piece of an almond) a couple of feet above the bird, and gradually move the treat toward the ceiling. (You may need a stool to stand on in order to do this). Once your bird gets to the top knot, say, "Good bird!" and hand over the treat. Pick up the bird, and let it climb to the top again.

Gradually wean your bird off treats, and just give it lots of praise upon reaching the top. If you have a smaller bird like a lovebird or a cockatiel, hold a 4- or 5-foot rope for it to climb.

Peek-A-Boo

This is also done on a bed and requires an extra person besides yourself. Have the other person hold up a large bath towel or a throw blanket tent style on top of the bed. Put your bird at one end of the tent and, as it runs through, quickly race to the other side of the tent and say, "Peek-a-boo!" Your bird should begin to run back the other direction, toward you. When it gets close, quickly dart back to the other side of the tent. Your bird will get lots of exercise running back and forth — and so will you!

Hide-And-Seek

Take the bird to an unfamiliar part of your house, such as the basement or a bedroom it has never been in. Put your bird on the floor at one end of the room, and then walk away. Say, "Find me!" Go several yards, and then peek around corners or stick your head up over the bed so that the bird can see you and then duck your head back in. Make it a far enough distance so that your bird will have to do a fair amount of walking at a good clip in order to chase after you.

You can call out your bird's name to see if it will come looking for you. If your pet is bonded to you, it will try to seek you out in order to avoid being left alone in a strange place. When your bird finds you, say, "Great job!" and give it a head scratch.

A Good Time For All

With any of these activities, don't give up too soon. Give your feathered game player some time to get the hang of what you are trying to do. If your bird doesn't seem interested, try that game again another day. Be tuned into what types of games your bird enjoys and what it is in the mood for on a particular day. Some days your bird might feel like chasing a Koosh ball down the staircase; other days it might want to just do some wing flapping.

Michelle Karras, a bird behavior consultant in Illinois, cautioned, "Don't try to force your parrot to play with you. If you do, your bird is instantly going to resist." Instead, demonstrate the game and try to make it look fun. Chances are, your bird's natural curiosity will bring it over. "You want to make your parrot think it's his idea to play the game, and you want to make it fun," Karras said. "If your bird's not enjoying himself, it's not going to be a good time for either of you."

Once you've found some games your parrot really likes, try to make them part of your regular routine. Not only will you be helping your parrot become more active, your parrot will also start to look forward to spending this time with you. "When you play with your bird, you become the most interesting thing in your bird's life," said Florida bird behavior consultant Kim Bear. "Exercise and play not only improve the quality of life for your parrot, but also help to strengthen that special bond between the two of you."