

Foraging For Food

Encourage foraging for a happier pet bird.

By Susan Chamberlain

Courtesy Amy Baggs

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Have you ever noticed how busy wild birds seem to be? When they're not flying or building nests or noisily interacting with one another, chances are they're foraging for food. Woodpeckers forage through crevices and holes in tree bark. Robins seek out worms in the soft spring soil. Sandpipers run to and fro in the surf, grabbing little crustaceans as the waves ebb. Raptors ride the air currents or sit patiently on tree branches as they watch for prey on the ground. Each species, including parrots, possess hunting and foraging methods. At my house, an example of foraging might be my double-yellowheaded Amazon, Cracker, breaking into a pizza box or bag of nachos. In the wild, she would be stripping bark from branches, marauding through cornfields and seeking fruit in treetops.

Wild birds must work for their food. Our pet birds are indulged. They sit in front of a dish and call for room service all day. Willing servants that we are, we gladly oblige. Wouldn't it be nice to give them a little work to do?

Foraging isn't a new idea. Many puzzle-style bird toys, designed to fill with food and treats, are readily available in pet shops and bird supply catalogs. A skewer-style rod feeder for fruits and vegetables is one of the simplest yet effective foraging devices. Simply skewer hunks of apple, carrot, pea pods and a slice of corn on the cob, and watch your bird go to work. A popular foraging treat toy features pine nuts and other treats inserted into drilled holes of a wooden block. Birds use their nimble tongue to extract the treats. Piñatas filled with treats or toys are shredded by birds to reveal their inner workings. These methods all encourage birds to 'work' for the rewards. That's foraging!

Why is foraging important? Pet birds aren't required to expend energy looking for food as they do in the wild. Foraging for food, treats and even favorite toys encourages exercise and reduces long periods of inactivity. Inactivity can lead to aberrant avian behavior, such as repetitive 'dancing,' feather plucking, self-mutilation or screaming. Foraging activities keep birds busy and add a sense of purpose to the daily routine. Stimulating a bird to search for its dinner is a great way to promote foraging, and there are a lot of creative ways to do so.

BIRD TALK reader Elise Negrin shares her home with two macaws and an African grey parrot. "Keeping the birds busy while they are caged is no easy feat," she said. "My avian veterinarian advised me to introduce foraging on a daily basis, and it has helped. I take the macaws' large size pellets and wrap each one in a 4-inch-square piece of newspaper. I make about 10 each day. I place them in the cage by inserting some between large pieces of wood on the toys hanging from chains or stuffing them between the bars of the cage where there is no perch nearby. This makes them work and stretch for the little packets. I even shove these paper-wrapped goodies into the insides of their bells. I also use safe containers (milk, juice, plastic water bottles) and hang them inside the cage with cotton string. I place some of their food (bird-safe dried fruit, nuts, popcorn, etc) inside a container and when hanging it, I make sure it's in a place where the birds have to stretch from a perch to grab the container. I like to make it challenging for them."

Negrin noted that observing the birds' favorite places and evaluating the cage setup is important when planning these foraging activities. Her green-winged macaw, Jackie, watches from a high perch when Negrin places the paper wrapped pellets around the large cage. "As soon as I turn my back, she is at work, finding them all," laughed Negrin. "And yes, she does eat the pellets!"

Negrin noticed that her African grey parrot enjoys ground-based activities. Indeed, many African grey enthusiasts report that their birds enjoy digging and scratching on the bottom of the cage. "I fill his little stainless-steel bucket with loose wood and plastic toy parts and leave it on the bottom of the cage with an empty dish nearby," said Negrin. "He takes the toys from the bucket and transfers them to the dish and back. Of course, I still provide other ready-made foraging toys for all the parrots. My parrots seem fine with these procedures, as they play with everything."

New York resident, Barbara Landsperg, who has worked in the pet field for most of her adult life and has had pet birds since she was a child, says that foraging is great for all birds, but particularly helpful for those with feather plucking issues.

(This was documented by a UC Davis study, "Foraging opportunity and increased physical complexity both prevent and reduce psychogenic feather picking by young Amazon parrots," (Sept. 2002). Visit the website to read the entire paper.)

Alternatively, you can wrap the food in paper towels or put it in small paper bags. Put food, nuts and pellets inside. You can even tie the bags like balloons by tying the end closed with a bit of sisal or paper rope. Landsperg has tried this with Amazons, conures and African greys, all with good results.

Here are some quick tips for foraging: Vary the location of your bird's food to encourage foraging. Hide treats inside or underneath toys so that your bird must search for them. (Let your pet observe you setting it up several times so it knows the food is there.) Small birds often ignore fruit and vegetables presented in a dish but enjoy working at chunks of beet greens or broccoli attached to cage bars with clips.

Research your bird's natural history to find out how it finds food in the wild and try to incorporate a few of its natural habits into your foraging menu. Not only is it fun to watch your pet seek and find food in this stimulating way, but foraging has great avian health benefits, too!