

Bird Toy Groups For All Types Of Play

Choose different types of toys from the four bird toy groups to encourage independent play

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Courtesy Patty Mangus, Ohio

Birds are more likely to try out new toys that are placed in easily accessible locations where the bird spends time.

Life in the wild is no walk in the park. Wild parrots must find food and water, court mates, compete for nest sites, lay and incubate eggs and nurture offspring. They must do all this in environments fraught with danger. Indoor life with humans protects birds from the dangers of outdoor life, but it lacks the rich range of experiences encountered in nature. While wild parrots withstand the stress of many life-threatening adversities, companion parrots must meet the challenge of boredom and changelessness.

So what's an indoor bird to do? Once the eating, drinking and preening are done, there's little left except vocalizing and, in an appropriate environment, what we humans would call "play." Without independent activities such as play, companion parrots might become excessively demanding of human attention or experience frustration related to unmet attention needs. A companion parrot that has not developed independent play behaviors might lose interest in almost everything except eating and preening — sometimes overpreening and destroying feathers. Independent self-rewarding behavior is an activity for which the only reward is the experience of that activity.

Four general categories of bird toys help meet a bird's needs:

Bird Toy Group 1 - Destroy Toys

Play accessories intended to be destroyed by chewing probably replicate the natural behavior of nest site preparation for these cavity-breeding avians. Destructible chewing bird toys include branches with bark, milled wood, chipped wood, raffia, straw, cholla, cork, leather, paper, jute, hemp, cotton or other natural materials.

The more easily destructible elements of a bird toy typically disappear first. Following enthusiastic destruction of twigs, paper or cardboard, most birds begin to lose interest in less-challenging components and turn to more substantial elements instead. Parrots with "buzz-saw" beaks might require more difficult-to-destroy materials, such as manzanita and other hardwoods. However, even smaller birds, including nest-building quaker parrots, often acquire a taste for "toothpick-making." The challenge is to provide items that are just destructible enough to retain the bird's interest and durable enough to enable the caregiver to provide them readily.

Bird Toy Group 2 - Sound/Noise Toys

These bird toys appeal to this social creature's instinct to communicate. Bells are unquestionably the most common and easily accessible sound-related toys. Stainless-steel or nickel-plated "liberty" bells are now especially designed for safe parrot play with large, one-piece clappers. Clappers don't usually last long, so bells are best positioned in pairs that will clank together or beside other hard elements. Metal pipe bells' cylindrical design ensures that birds can't remove the clappers.

Plastic pipe bells, rattles and clackers include hard plastic beads and/or elements designed to produce sound when the bird toy moves. They are generally less loud but as enticing as metallic ringing to most birds.

There are also music boxes that play a song when the bird presses a button. Music boxes today include several buttons activating different sounds or melodies. Tapes and CDs entertain our birds with pre-recorded voices or sounds. Even non-talking parrots seem to enjoy sound-repeating devices, mumbling away at it.

Parrots that primarily whistle — cockatiels, especially — become fascinated with the way sounds resonate within a bell.

Bird Toy Group 3 - Interactive Toys

Many play accessories appeal to a companion parrot's intellectual or emotional needs. These bird toys are usually constructed of indestructible or difficult-to-destroy materials, although food or destructible elements may also be included.

Beads are a favorite component of many interactive bird toys. Parrots love manipulating beads of all shapes and sizes. They offer sound and movement, and many are indestructible.

Puzzle toys seem to fascinate cockatoos. They enjoy manipulating or dismantling them in addition to simply chewing them up. These might include nuts and bolts, knots to untie, moveable elements or small compartments that can be opened. When food is included, these now become foraging toys.

Foraging toys: More and more bird toys are now designed to provide opportunities for a bird to “forage for” food. Whether foraging is the primary function of the toy or simply a small part of its function, the understanding that food is sometimes found here can contribute to a bird toy’s longtime serviceability in the bird’s behavioral environment.

Snuggling or comfort toys: Some birds enjoy simply sitting beside (in contact with) a bird toy. Large macaws, for example, may find comfort with a favorite play accessory nestled under a wing. A soft bird toy with “preenable” elements might be provided near or against the back of the cage beside a perching location, preferably beside a place where the bird sleeps.

Hiding or peeking-out toys: Some birds like to hide behind a bird toy. For this purpose the larger the bird toy, the better. Avoid long strings in which the bird might become entangled, trim longer parts or add knots to shorten the fabric strands.

Surrogate enemy toys: Some parrots appear to have a need for at least one bird toy against which to express aggression. This surrogate “enemy” or “rival” is often metal and probably hangs in close proximity to the side of the cage where it can be loudly banged against the bars. This bird toy should not be removed, because this opportunity to release or express energy is natural and necessary.

Foot toys: Whether it’s a bit of rope inside a straw knotted through a large bead or a little wooden dumbbell, a simple foot toy can provide hours of entertainment. Offer a bowl or basket of foot toys daily, especially for caiques, Poicephalus and other birds that favor floor play.

“Mirrors” or simply shiny surfaces should be provided only after careful observation of their effect on a particular bird as they can contribute to behavioral complications. Glass mirrors are dangerous because of their finish as well as their breakability. Opt for shiny acrylic, stainless-steel or nickel-plated “mirrors.”

Bird Toy Group 4 - Exercise Toys

Parrots housed in a cage, especially those with trimmed wing feathers, require additional accessories to facilitate exercise. Try these bird toys to facilitate exercise:

Swings: Many parrots love to swing. Some swing front to back. More commonly, birds enjoy swinging side to side or in circles.

Grippable perches: Many parrots love to hold on to their perches and flap their wings. To accommodate this, one or more perches should be small enough to be gripped rather than simply stood upon. African grey parrots and Poicephalus are famous for this behavior, and for this reason, these birds might even fall their perches are too smooth or too large to grip firmly.

Grippable cage bars: I believe that birds with trimmed wing feathers require at least a little time atop the cage to hold bars and flap violently. Young grey parrots often exhibit this behavior, but almost all companion parrots take part in this.

Boings: Large spirals of stiff cotton rope perch promise many happy hours of swinging, bouncing and climbing.

Facilitate Play

Birds are more likely to try out bird toys that are placed in easily accessible locations where the bird spends time, usually hung at beak level. If a hard-plastic or metal toy hangs an inch or so away from the cage at the end of each perch, then when the bird wants to climb, it must first get by that bird toy. By moving the bird toy out of the way, the bird first experiences “vanquishing” a rival from territory. In this way, bird toys may achieve roles as surrogate enemies.

How Many Toys?

Multiple bird toys offer a pet bird the power of choice, which gives birds a sense of control over their otherwise planned environment. Provide three or four new bird toys at a time, because the bird toy that the bird chooses to not play with is just as important as the bird toy with which it plays. Even bird toys initially avoided might eventually be destroyed or courted. Even if this never happens, these multiple bird toys provide the bird with opportunities to make decisions about what is or is not dangerous.

While it is probably OK to rotate bird toys that are not being played with, I think it’s a bad idea to remove a bird toy that the bird is actively using. If the environment, whether it’s a cage or open perch, provides a parrot with a sense of choice and

control, that bird is more likely to remain a satisfied, independent and exploratory individual.

Evolving Trends

As bird toys continue to evolve, expect to see new designs accommodating not only instinctual wild behaviors but also behaviors encountered in the home. Expect more play accessories designed to replace unwanted activities. For example, “wall art” play accessories can hang on the wall in place of a decorative item to protect both cherished items and the wall from busy beaks. There are more toy-accessorized wearable items for the human, such as eyeglasses and jewelry to facilitate interactive play. Destructible paper barriers will distract from screaming, and fringing or snapping bird toys will deter feather destructive behaviors.