



Medical Center for Birds

www.medicalcenterforbirds.com

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Foraging Behaviors-Getting Started with Enrichment

Foraging is the term used for food acquisition and is how animals hunt, dig, search, and scavenge to find their food in the wild. In our homes, many times our birds eat from a dish without having to put forward any effort to acquire food. In the wild, parrots can spend on average 60% of their day foraging for their food, varying by species and other factors. Although your bird may be very content eating food from a dish there are numerous benefits to teaching your bird how to forage. Foraging is a fun activity to do with your bird, especially since it requires some coaching on your end. Not only will foraging build a stronger bond with you and your bird, it is a great way to teach your bird how to entertain themselves. Many birds depend on us for all of their entertainment needs and are at a loss for what to do when we leave the room, maybe even yelling to get our attention or get us to come back. Undesired behaviors like feather damaging can also be positively affected by learning to forage by giving the bird an alternative behavior to occupy themselves. Enrichment activities like foraging, shredding, and training can help combat boredom and keep your captive parrots active and interacting with their environment. We teach foraging by breaking it down into small steps to ensure they are successful in getting the treat or food item out of the foraging toy. Keeping them successful means that we can hold the birds interest in foraging and is instantly reinforcing. Example: When I chew into this Dixie cup, I found an almond inside! Equally important is when we notice a bird cannot get the treat out of a foraging toy. This tells us that they are not sure of what to do or have lost interest and we should reevaluate our plan by changing the complexity of the foraging we offered, changing the food reinforcer, or other options.

Enhancing Foraging Behaviors: Try some of these creative enrichment techniques, if they are applicable for your bird. Birds that may not be suitable for foraging include those which are visually impaired or physically limited (arthritis), or are underweight. If you aren't sure if foraging is safe for your bird, check with your veterinarian.

Enjoy!:

- Covered food bowls: Wrap the food bowls with newspaper, tissue paper, or paper towel so that your bird spends time chewing the cover to get at the food. It is helpful to teach your bird by breaking this foraging toy into little steps, like by punching a starter hole into the top cover. You can also try simulating the foraging activity yourself, so that they can see how to rip the paper and what goodies are inside. Once your bird has mastered the beginning level of foraging with the starter hole, you can increase complexity by offering a smaller starter hole, no starter hole, or using a tougher material to chew through, even cardboard!
- Foraging perch: A piece of non-treated wood (e.g., pine lumber) drilled with holes into which nuts, seeds, or other treats fit tightly. The reward should be visible but not accessible without chewing down through the wood. This perch material can be used with your training perch, when the bird is outside of the cage with you. The wood can also be used as a perch in the cage, or even hung in the cage to increase the challenge.
- Ghosties: You can individually wrap nuts, seeds, or other rewards in small pieces of paper, corn husks or other materials. Take a square of newspaper or tissue paper, place the treats inside and twist the paper around the treats. The difficulty level of the ghosties can be changed by using soft paper, like tissue paper, or more tough paper, like newspaper or cardstock. To add an extra



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level of complexity, try using a few layers instead of one or placing the ghosties in a difficult to reach area. Don't forget about using a starter hole if needed!

- ❑ Mixing food with inedible items: Pellets or seeds can be mixed in with wood beads, plastic bottle caps, shredded paper, or other items so that the bird has to dig through to find its food. Be careful that the inedible objects are large enough that they can't swallow, for example wooden bead size. Puzzle toys: There are several different types of puzzle toys available for your bird, even some that are meant to be for dogs! The toys vary in complexity and can range from pull pieces out or unscrewing the toy, to lifting flaps or shaking food out. Even though these toys may seem straightforward to us, it is still very important to break up teaching these toys into little steps so your bird can be successful.

To learn more about foraging and enrichment, visit Busy Beaks Academy, at www.busybeaksacademy.com. Busy Beaks Academy offers group classes and private sessions for all of you training and foraging needs!