

FORAGING FOR YOUR BIRD'S HEALTH

(Notes from a presentation to RDCBS by Trish Koontz)

The following article is an excellent brief overview of why your bird(s) **MUST** have foraging in their daily life!! The article is reprinted with permission from the 1st edition of the "BIO Nutrition Food Column", by Shauna Roberts (Feeding Feathers list on yahoogroups.com).

What's All The Crop About?

It's still dark. The sun is about to make its morning appearance, but hasn't arrived quite yet. A rustling is heard high in a tree, then a muffled squawk is heard and another. What almost appear to be shadows charge gracefully out in flight as the sun appears on the horizon. These silhouettes are parrots leaving the roosting tree or nesting cavity early in the morning making way to the foraging grounds. These foraging areas are possibly 2 miles or more away. Once they arrive they eat. Depending on the species or the location, they will depart. Certain species go to another place to forage in the morning and later that day. After foraging for a few hours, they will settle into the trees for several hours during the late morning and early afternoon. At this time, they will nap, rest, preen, allopreen, and engage in games or tricks with one another. The parrots chatter away telling what might appear to be stories. Then, during the late afternoon, they return to foraging in the trees or on the ground. They fill their crops before heading back to where they will once again, rest for the night.

How can we incorporate this type of schedule into a captive parrot's daily routine? We can emulate this natural schedule by feeding twice a day, morning and late afternoon and no more. The question has been asked if parrots should have a lunch, or if they should have food in their cages at all times, or given a snack before bedtime? 2 meals a day may be optimal. The reason isn't as simple as replicating a wild feeding routine. For a parrot's body to work in a healthy way, the parrot needs to be fed twice a day. The reason that this feeding schedule works so well is because parrots are equipped with a crop.

Parrots are built for amazing efficiency and the crop is part of that adaptation. The crop is a sac like, esophageal enlargement that is part of the digestion tract. The crop softens and lubricates food. The primary function of the crop is for food storage. Parrots need this food storage daily in the wild, whether or not there is a plentiful food supply. We can over feed captive parrots, but we must be careful to never underfeed them either! Parrots are built to have a small amount of food entering their stomachs at all times. The crop is what enables them to eat large meals (at foraging times) twice a day. They do not need to be eating around the clock to keep up with caloric needs. The crop works by holding the food and letting small amounts of food pass into the stomach at all times. If captive parrots constantly have food in front of them, they may eat too much resulting in obesity. They also are not using their crop as it is intended or designed to work.

Foraging in Captivity

No wild parrot ever has its breakfast or dinner put in front of it all chopped and ready to eat. There can be an abundance of food available to them. That food needs to not only be found by the parrot, but cracked, peeled or opened all while keeping an eye out for predators. Food in the wild not only fills the need for hunger, but finding food is also an active daily process. Parrots in captivity require challenges in order to better satisfy their intellectual and physical needs. Providing daily foraging activities can be a step closer to having happier captive companions. Here are some ideas. Be sure to take fresh foods out of the cage before they spoil.

Foraging Ideas

Hang fresh veggies and fruits from skewers

Weave fresh veggies and fruits through cage bars

Fill up those hanging cage toys with chunks of veggies and/or fruit along with some toys

If your flock interacts well, try feeding them occasionally with a large communal platter (they will socialize as well as eat, sometimes taking several hours to eat what they might consume in only minutes when by themselves)

Wrap food bowls like a package. Do this with paper or perhaps a large collard leaf. To start you may need to poke a hole in the center of the wrapping to get them started, or even tear it, showing some parrots what to do.

Offer whole foods, such as a whole baby beet with top, baby carrot with green tops, green garlic with tops etc

Fill a bowl up with toys and then drizzle seed over the top so that the seeds hide in the bowl.

Wrap seed or other hard foods up with clean white paper (NEVER use recycled paper for parrots)

Hide nuts or seeds in between rope strands

Make a foraging tree as suggested by Scott Echols DVM , Dipl ABVP at the AAV conference 2004. A foraging tree is a playstand that has several food bowls, each holding a small amount of food only, at varying heights. You can also hang food from the stand with small ropes or string so the parrot needs to pull food up. You can use puzzle toys to hide food or empty wooden vessels found at craft stores. You can increase your parrots foraging skills as it learns.

Drill holes in a piece of wood, it can be a block or a 2x6 that is around 8" long for a large parrot. Into those holes, pound some sort of nuts such as pine nuts.

Cover the cage grate with paper, then hide food in towel folds placed on the cage bottom.

Hide food in brown lunch sacks, then hang with string or give as food toys.

Hide food in stainless steel buckets or sew a cotton bag.

Ideas seem to be endless; be creative and most importantly have fun!

FORAGING IDEAS FROM RDCBS MEMBERS

One of the most important things to remember about foraging is that you may have to teach your bird(s) how to do it! In other words, start out with very easy things for the bird to do to get to the goodies and increase the difficulty as your bird learns. If you want to cover all the food bowls so that the bird must work to uncover them (a great foraging activity), at first just start out with a small piece of paper simply laid over the bowl that the bird must remove. Then work up gradually to several layers of heavy paper taped over the bowl. This may take days or weeks to gradually train your bird but it is well worth the effort. Anything you can do to add quality foraging time to your bird's life is a huge gift to the bird.

Pine cones, washed, dried, and baked in the oven at 200 degrees for 30 minutes (to kill any insects) are a natural foraging idea that your birds will love. Hang a cone from a little chain and watch your bird swing and sway. Tie one to the side of the cage to make it more difficult to access. Put one on the bottom of the cage for a foot toy. You'll think of many more uses, I'm sure. Most birds will get into the simple destruction of the plain cones. I love to smear a little peanut butter way deep in the cone and watch my birds spend forever to get every little drop. You can wedge little bits of carrot, snow peas, or apple in the cones. The sky is the limit for using these cheap and readily available foraging naturals!

One of my favorite foraging platforms is the wreath. I use these in my aviary and I have one suspended in the dining room that is a favorite hang-out for my 2 Amazons. Your imagination can run wild using a

simple grapevine wreath from any craft store. You can get small ones for the cage and larger ones to use as a suspended perch + they are so cheap! Choose only natural grapevine with no coating of paint or varnish. If you have access to the materials you can even make your own wreath from willow cuttings or grapevine. Be sure to scrub the wreath with hot water to which you have added some bird-safe soap or Grapefruit Seed Extract (GSE) for cleaning. Let the wreath dry naturally and then add some simple plastic chain with cable ties and you are ready to have fun with the foraging items. BTW, you can hang the wreath in the traditional manner from one chain or attach 3 chains and use it as shown below. My birds love to work out the carrot chunks, brown bag packages with nuts inside, apple slices, etc. It is so easy to shove the foraging treats into the wreath and you can attach things with cable ties or heavy string to make it even more difficult for your bird to get to them. After your bird learns how to use the foraging wreath, you can really make it challenging and know you have provided some grand fun.



Trish Koontz from RDCBS

I save all the envelopes I get in junk mail that are all paper (no plastic windows). I put a little seed in it, seal the envelope, twist it (trying to keep seed spread around the whole envelope); then I stuff it through a toilet paper roll. I've been successful at piercing the paper roll & envelope so that a small chain can link through it or you can use a skewer.

Kimi Cousins from RDCBS:)

We often use a small, inexpensive plastic container(our lunch meat comes in one) to put fruit, veggies, etc. in and cover it with paper, rubber banded into place under the rim. If the container is translucent or opaque, then the fid has no idea what is inside until he/she gets curious enough to tear into it! You can cover with cloth, too, but our grey loves to tear the paper and pick a small hole to peek through! After she consumes the goodies, she has a blast playing with the container. We also use clean, leafy branches to put food on. Just pluck a few branches, then push on the fruit or veggie and wedge or tie the branch in the cage. Clearly, this stuff only works if your bird isn't intimidated by new things, but our fid loves them! We have a couple of manufactured foraging toys, so we rotate them and these methods for quick to create puzzlers.

Susan Bales from RDCBS

Sunflower Foraging Toy

by Michelle Czaikowski from RDCBS

This is a quick and easy foraging toy you can make with objects that are probably already in your home. It is recommended for foraging beginners, or for birds who love to shred paper. Basic instructions are provided below for two versions of this simple toy. One may be hung in your bird's cage; the other may be used as a foot toy.

Assembly time: <5 minutes

Materials needed:

For the foot toy version:

Unbleached basket-style coffee filter
Untreated hemp rope, Paulie rope, or leather strand
Your choice of treats
Scissors

For the hanging version:

3 unbleached basket-style coffee filters
Untreated hemp rope, Paulie rope, or leather strand
Your choice of treats
Quick link
Scissors

Sunflower Foraging Foot Toy Instructions



1. Place foraging treats in the center of the coffee filter. Small birdie bagels or woven palm leaf strips may be used instead of or in addition to the foraging treats.



2. Lift the coffee filter paper up and twist it around so that the filter forms a tight pouch around the foraging treats.

3. Tie a piece of hemp rope/Paulie rope/leather at the twist.

4. Cut the rope 1-2 cm from the knot.



5. Fold the coffee filter back so that the ridges of the filter form the flower petals, and

the treat pouch forms the flower's center.

Sunflower Foraging Hanging Toy Instructions

Follow steps 1, 2, and 3 of the Foot Toy Instructions.



4. After tying the knot, create another sunflower and tie the flower to the same piece of rope 2"-3" away from the first sunflower.



5. Repeat Step 4.

6. Tie the end of the rope to a quick link and hang in your bird's cage!

One simple thing I do for my birds if provide small baby aspirin or prescription bottles (after being thoroughly washed) and they will spend hours trying to get the child-proof lids off of them. To make it even more interesting, I'll add a nut or some dried macaroni to the bottles so that they rattle! They enjoy this.

I also take white tissue paper (like used in gifts) and tie up a nut or two inside with colored ribbon. They love playing with the ribbons and also like shredding the paper. You can hang these from the cage bars using the ribbon or provide small "gifts" as foot toys.

Just a couple of my very simple ideas that are cheap! I have a lot of pill bottles around whereas some folks might not. Comes with getting old! LOL

Carol Wilson from RDCBS

Make Your Own Foraging Plate

by Michelle Czaikowski from RDCBS

Not being very crafty, I am always looking for simple ways to improve my birds' environment and keep them physically and mentally active. Foraging is an activity we as bird owners have to encourage and create opportunities for in our birds' lives.

Creating a foraging plate does not require any tools and can be created, from start to finish, in fewer than thirty minutes! Before you begin, take a look at the bottom of your bird's cage. Is there an area that remains relatively free of droppings? If so, that may be an excellent location for a foraging plate. Next, select a bird-safe plate that curves up at the sides. I used heavy "unbreakable" plastic plates. You know better than anyone what your bird is capable of destroying, so keep this in mind when selecting a plate for the foraging plate. Those with larger birds may need something heavier and more durable than a plate. It is important that the plate you choose curves up at the edges so it can hold the materials you are going to pile onto it. Now you are ready to assemble your foraging plate!

Step 1: Start by placing a paper towel on the plate. Next, place foot toys, toy making pieces, even half-shredded toy parts on top of the paper towel. Aim for a variety of textures and objects. Naturally, make sure all wood pieces are untreated and bird safe. I used Fun Max Leather squares, ABC blocks, Super Bird Creations vine rings, Husk Chewies, balsa wood pieces, and pine wood pieces.

Step 2: Add some treats! You may want to start with things that won't go bad if they sit out for a day. I used Flying South Pre-filled pine nut talon toys, pistachio nuts, and several seeds.



Step 3: Cover it up. I sprinkled untreated Aspen wood shavings on top, Planet Pleasures woven palm strips, and a shredded paper towel. The first few times you offer the foraging plate to your bird, you may want to make sure one or two favorite treats are visible to encourage your bird to explore it.

You will want to remove any treats that could spoil each day, and any items that may have been soiled. Add new treats and toys each morning, and watch your bird explore! You will want to empty the contents of the plate entirely to clean it and remove any hidden droppings every few days.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Scott Echols' excellent "Captive Foraging" DVD can be ordered from Amazon.com and many online parrot supply stores.

You can obtain Susan Loeb's "Creating a Foraging Tray for Your Parrot" from Project Bird Watch Library:
[www.indonesian-parrot-project.org/Library/foragingtray.html](http://indonesian-parrot-project.org/Library/foragingtray.html).

An awesome FREE download e-book by Kris Porter entitled [The Parrot Enrichment Activity Book](http://members.shaw.ca/mavimet/files/PEAB.pdf) can be found at this web address:
<http://members.shaw.ca/mavimet/files/PEAB.pdf>

Do a web search using the phrases "parrots"+"foraging ideas" and TONS of great links will pop up! The ideas are really out there!