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Enrichment and foraging for birds

Foraging is simply the act of **looking for food** and is a form of enrichment, providing much needed physical and mental stimulation.

Most birds spend their day performing the following 3 behaviours:

1. Foraging, 2. Socialising, 3. Grooming.

Wild birds spend majority of their day foraging, ~ **5-9 hours a day!**

Pet birds have their food provided in a bowl, which takes away the opportunity to forage.

If socialisation is also limited, with a bird spending many hours a day alone, it is not surprising that time is redirected to less productive activities, like feather picking, self-mutilation, screaming and other behavioural problems. This adversely affects their quality of life.

When given a choice between foraging and eating out of a food bowl, most pet birds prefer to forage.

Foraging can be easily provided in the home environment using homemade or commercially available safe foraging toys, and can be provided both inside and outside the cage (for example by having a foraging tree).

When starting out, it is important to be patient, taking the time to encourage and teach your bird to forage. Make food easy to find initially, then increase to more challenging tasks. Placing a large colourful complex puzzle in the cage may frighten your bird and be counterproductive to the process.

Below is a list of some foraging ideas:

- Provide multiple feeding stations. Rather than having food in a single food bowl, have multiple smaller food dishes placed at different locations and levels in the cage.
- Cover the food with paper or cardboard
- Mix torn up pieces of cardboard, native vegetation or similar non-toxic material in the food bowl or on a shallow tray
- Hide food in brown paper bags, scrunched up toilet paper/paper towel rolls or paper cups. You may need to pierce holes to begin with and make the food visible to let your bird know where the food is and encourage foraging.
- Clip pieces of vegetables/native vegetation at various locations in the cage.

Use your imagination and make it fun!

Other forms of enrichment include providing a variety of safe toys. It is **normal behaviour** for a parrot to chew on wooden perches, safe wooden toys and native plants, and destroy these items. Opportunities for this should **always** be available.

- Destructible and shredding toys made of **natural materials**, such as natural wood, cardboard, paper, native plants, large vegetable pieces and safe plant leaf are best, and most closely resemble what birds encounter in the wild.
- If your bird is not interacting with a provided toy, you may need to replace it with a different toy or allow your bird to observe you hiding food in it or playing with the toy.
- **Do not use rope/cloth or metal** (zinc, copper, lead, rusty toys) **toys as these are not safe for birds.**

An excellent educational resource “Captive Foraging DVD” is available online via YouTube Lafeber channel and covers some of the above concepts in more detail. There are various other resources available for foraging ideas and commercially available toys.