

Enrichment and foraging for birds

Foraging is simply the act of **looking for food** and is a form of enrichment. Why is it so important?

Most birds spend their day performing the following 3 behaviours, known as “maintenance behaviours”:

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

Wild birds spend majority of their day foraging, **~50-90% of their 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 chewing, feather picking, mutilation, screaming, aggression and other behavioural problems. This adversely affects their overall 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.

Below is a list of some simple foraging ideas:

- Cover the food bowl with paper or cardboard
- Mix torn up pieces of cardboard or similar non-toxic material inside the food bowl
- Hide food in brown paper bags, scrunched up toilet paper/paper towel rolls or paper cups
- Hide food in paper/cardboard boxes. 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 the chewing activity.
- Put a small amount of food at different locations around the cage and clip pieces of vegetables/native vegetation at various locations
- For ground parrots, provide a shallow tray with various food items mixed with torn up pieces of cardboard, native vegetation, etc.

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. 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.
- **Do not use rope/cloth or metal** (zinc, copper, lead, rusty toys) **toys as these are not safe for birds.**
- Some birds may be fearful of new objects. Introduce foraging items/toys one item at a time starting with simple items and observe your bird’s response. Placing a large colourful complex puzzle in the cage may scare your bird and be overall counterproductive to the process.

An excellent educational resource “Captive Foraging DVD” is available online via YouTube Lafeber channel and covers the above concepts in detail. All bird owners are encouraged to watch this 30-minute DVD.