

Parrot Enrichment Made Easy



Low Cost Tips and Tricks

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Time vs. Money

Parrots need an enriched environment for good quality of life. Moreover, providing enrichment to your parrots will go a long way towards the avoidance of behavior problems, especially that of feather destructive behavior. Enrichment can take many forms, from playing music to offering “store bought” toys. This pamphlet will focus primarily on methods for creating foraging opportunities at home from inexpensive materials.

When we think about providing toys for our birds, we all encounter a similar problem. We land squarely in the middle of the conflict between the resources of time and money. Even if we have the financial resources to buy all of our parrots’ toys, it is nothing if not disheartening to spend \$25.00 on a toy that only lasts for 25 minutes.

Sooner or later, most of us decide that *making* some of the toys our parrots need is a better investment . Over the years, I’ve developed a bit of a system that works well for my flock of eight. It relies on a combination of some toys that I purchase and more that I make at home. Below you will find instructions for making some of the toys that my parrots have grown to love.

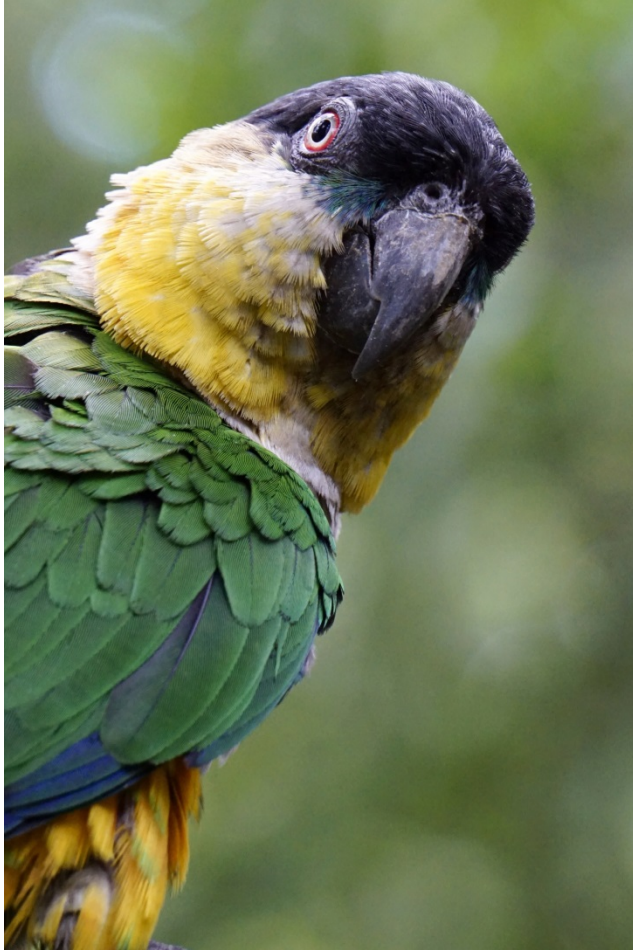
Foraging

Parrots spend hours each day foraging for food in the wild. It is a core activity, vitally important for both physical and psychological health. In fact, a lack of foraging opportunities has been linked to the development of oral stereotypies in companion parrots. This information came from a personal conversation that I had in Australia a few years ago with Scott Echols, DVM.

Therefore, each project illustrated in this pamphlet offers a foraging challenge. Some are relatively easy, while others present a level of difficulty that even experienced foragers will enjoy.

You may have a parrot who doesn't yet know how to forage or doesn't "play with toys." Never fear! This can be taught and later in this booklet, I illustrate how you can introduce a relatively difficult toy in easy steps that should keep your parrot engaged and learning this necessary skill.

Making the Task Easier



Making toys can be a hassle or a relatively easy experience. Having the materials you need on hand and organized into different bins or drawers will make the process go more quickly and reduce frustration on your end.

The following two slides offer lists of things to salvage from your own daily lives that can be used to make toys, as well as supplies that you will need to purchase. Whenever possible, I have provided links to websites that offer the necessary items.

Unfortunately, there is not one single website that has all the items that you will need and some items can be found in multiple places. Those to which I have provided a link either have the best type of a given item, or have the best price on an item.

Supplies to Purchase

- [Stainless steel skewers](#) for birds
- [Curly SS skewer](#)
- [7-inch SS Ring](#)
- [Vine balls](#)
- [Wood slices of an appropriate thickness](#)
- [Beads](#) (size appropriate to the parrot)
- [Finger traps](#)
- [Hemp twine, poly cord, or leather for hanging](#)
- [Large spin wheels](#) (optional)
- Small Dixie cups (3 oz.)
- Lunch bags
- Drinking straws (plastic or paper)
- [Disposable commuter cups](#)
- Cotton gardening gloves
- Masking tape
- Shredded crinkle paper (Dollar Store or [Uline](#))
- White toilet paper on the roll



Supplies to Salvage

- Paperback books
- Phone books
- Used printer paper
- Toilet and paper towel rolls
- Small cardboard boxes
- Cardboard egg cartons (no Styrofoam)
- Cardboard 6-pack holders
- Plastic berry containers



Now For Some Fun!

Each of the next 20 slides describes a foraging project that you can make at home.

I have denoted the supplies needed in red print (with the exception of food items). This should make it easy for you to immediately identify whether you have what is needed for each toy before you begin to create it.

For parrots with limited skills, I suggest that you begin by offering the Toilet Paper Shredder. This seems to be an item that doesn't cause a lot of fear and appeals to a wide range of individuals and species.





Toilet Paper Shredder

Place a whole roll of white unscented **toilet paper** (Scott Tissue is best for this because it is so tightly wrapped) onto a **7-inch Fun Ring** and hang in or on top of the cage. This is a great toy for parrots who barber their feathers or for parrots who don't usually play with toys.

For variation, you can thread the roll of toilet paper onto a straight stainless steel **(SS) skewer**. Place an acrylic washer, **large spin wheel**, piece of wood or cardboard under the roll to support it when hung on a straight skewer.

Hint: You can stuff small pieces of nuts or seeds down between the layers to create a foraging opportunity.



Artichoke Forager

Take a fresh, uncooked artichoke and stuff slices of vegetables or fruit, or small pieces of nuts, seeds, whole grain pasta and other items of interest behind each leaf.

Once complete, thread onto a straight **SS skewer** and hang. As with the previous toy, it's best to place an acrylic washer or piece of wood or cardboard beneath the artichoke to support it.

Safety Note: Artichokes have sharp spines at the end of each leaf. If the artichoke you bring home from the store has these intact, take a pair of kitchen shears or scissors you don't care about and cut these off before filling and hanging.



Skewered Vegetable Explosion

Idea #1: Cut a whole head of cabbage in half across “the equator.” Spread each cut half with a thin layer of warm nut butter. Lay small pieces of nuts and seeds into the nut butter (optional). Carefully put the two cut sides back together and thread the whole thing onto a straight **SS skewer** and hang.

Idea #2: Cut a whole, uncooked pumpkin (small sugar pumpkins work best) in half and place onto a food skewer. Leave the seeds and pulp in the cavity. Your parrot may enjoy eating the seeds fresh. Other veggies can be added as well.



No Skewer Vegetable Explosion

On the other hand, why go to all that trouble? Just give him the whole pumpkin.



Bell Pepper Forager

Take a bell pepper and fill with the fruits and veggies for the day.

Top if you like with a whole grain rice cake and hang using a **SS skewer**. (I would not do this if your parrot eats much of the rice cake – too many refined carbs!)

If the rice cake is contraindicated in your case, you can use a piece of cardboard that will cover the top.



Quick and Simple Wood Toy

Wood slices can be purchased online or created by cutting a 2x4 (pine or fir) across the grain into slices appropriate to your parrot's beak. (For greys and Amazons, I cut them $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick.) Once cut, drill a hole in the middle of each.

Alternately thread wood slices and **beads** onto a **SS skewer**. (The one shown in the photo is a "curly" skewer.) This toy takes about one minute to make.

Other items, such as **finger traps**, can be added for interest.

Egg Carton Forager



Cut a **cardboard egg carton** in half crossways with a serrated knife. Take 6 small treats and put each into a **3 oz. Dixie cup**. Squash the cup around each treat. Place one cup into each of the 6 indentations in the carton. Close the egg carton and tape shut with **masking tape**.

Put the egg carton inside of a **paper lunch bag**, fold over the top, and tape closed with masking tape. Put the whole thing onto a **SS skewer** and hang. *This is a good toy for very experienced foragers. For beginners, I have described a more gradual introduction in later slides.

- The photo shows a slightly different manner of creating a toy with an egg carton. Really, the only limit to different variations of this toy is your imagination.
- **Safety Note:** New egg cartons can be purchased on-line, if you are worried about the risk of *salmonella* from “used” egg cartons. The masking tape is completely safe.



Toilet Paper Roll Forager

Idea #1: Fill an empty **toilet paper roll** with **shredded, crinkle paper** and hide a treat in the middle. Place onto a **skewer** or thread a **leather lace or some poly cord** through the roll, with an item at each end that will keep the stuffing from falling out. Items to place on the ends could be pieces of wood, cardboard, or **large spin wheels**.

Idea #2: Flatten an empty toilet paper roll. Tape one end closed with masking tape. Punch a hole in the other end through both layers. Fill the tube with small treats and crinkle paper, then hang in the cage by threading hemp twine through the holes at the other end.



Treat In Jail Toy

Items needed include a **toilet paper roll** or two (or a paper towel roll that has been cut in two), several **plastic drinking straws**, a **length of twine** and a small scissors with a sharp tip. Cut the drinking straws into 2 to 3-inch pieces. Poke a hole through the middle of each paper roll so that it can be hung in the cage. Thread some twine through, tying a knot in the bottom and creating a loop for hanging at the top. Place a treat in the very middle of each tube, close to the twine. Create holes in the roll for the straws and push the straw pieces through these holes creating a “treat in jail.” *This toy is a hassle to make, but the birds love it.



Berry Container Forager

Fill an empty **plastic berry container** with food items, treats, foot toys, etc. Tape closed with **masking tape** and offer as shown or tie closed with **twine** for hanging. **Safety Note:** Always keep lengths of twine short when hanging toys so that your bird cannot get caught in the length.



Measuring Cup Toy

Purchase a set of **metal measuring cups** that have holes in the end of the handles. Take two lengths of **poly cord** (1/8-inch diameter and available from Walmart) that are about 30 inches long. Place them side by side and find the middle. Holding them together, tie a slip knot in the middle, creating a loop for hanging. You will now have 4 lengths of cord hanging down from your knot.

Tie a measuring cup onto the end of each of the 4 lengths. Fill each of the 4 cups with **crinkle paper** and a treat. You can make this even more challenging by placing the treat inside a **Dixie cup**. Cover each of the cups with a **piece of paper** (printer, newspaper, etc) and tape in place with **masking tape**.



This toy is great for experienced foragers!

The Comfort Cup

Purchase a package of **disposable commuter cups** sold to keep drinks warm. An example is the Chinet Comfort Cup, but other brands are available also (see list provided).

Make a hole in the bottom of the cup using a sharp object and do the same in the approximate middle of the corresponding lid. Fill the cup with a variety of **shredded paper**, treats wrapped in **paper or Dixie cups**, foot toys, etc. Then, put on the lid and thread the hole thing onto a **skewer**.



Trash Toys

Embrace the idea of “trash toys.” Save **small boxes, paper towel rolls and cardboard 6-pack holders**. Stuff small boxes and cardboard rolls with small treats and **shredded paper** and then stuff these into the 6-pack for foraging fun. Paper **lunch bags** or party treat bags (available at Dollar Stores) can be used the same way. Just tie the end closed and hang in the cage with a short piece of twine.



Vine Ball Foragers

Take a **vine ball** and insert a treat like a whole almond into the center so that your parrot has to chew into the ball to access the treat. Place onto a **skewer**.

Once he is talented at this challenge, begin to stuff the ball with **shredded paper** to make this more difficult.

This toy can then be made much more complicated, as the photo illustrates.

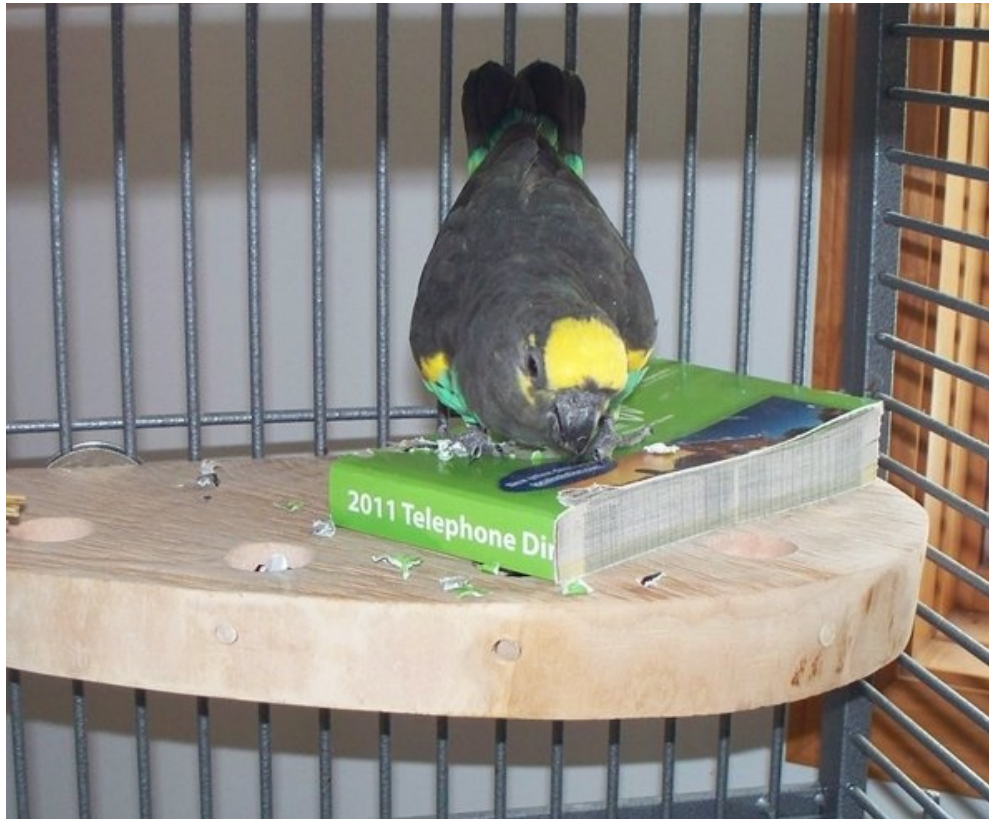


The Glove Stuffer

Purchase **cotton gardening gloves** from the Dollar Store. Stuff a glove, including the fingers, with food items (treats, Nutriberries, pellets), **crinkled paper**, foot toys, and other items of interest.

Tie the wrist closed with **twine** and hang in the cage or on a playstand.

Safety note: Remember to keep the length of the twine short enough that your parrot can't get caught in it!



Alternatively, provide your parrot with a platform perch (see photo) and place the book there. Many parrots appreciate a flat place to perch.

Paperback Books

Many parrots enjoy chewing paper. You can take a **paperback book or old phone book** and drill a hole all the way through near to the binding (so that it holds together). Hang in the cage with **twine or poly cord**.

You can also simply lay a length of twine or cord like a bookmark in the center of the book and tie so that it hangs down from the top of the cage.



The Denim Forager

Search your Goodwill Stores for **denim overalls** made for babies. Sew or use **zip ties** to close off the bottom of each leg. Stuff the pockets and legs with **shredded paper**, foot toys, treats, etc.

This toy is especially good for parrots who like to chew fabric.

Safety Note: This toy may not be safe for parrots who focus on chewing metal, since the clasps are not stainless steel.



Plastic Straw Forager

Purchase **plastic drinking straws** and fill with small seeds and nut pieces. After filling, heat the ends for two seconds with a cigarette lighter held underneath. Pinch closed. For a more earth-conscious version, purchase [paper straws](#).

Safety Note: If using plastic straws, observe your parrot to make sure that he isn't ingesting the plastic. It's unlikely, but as with any new toy, supervision initially is recommended.



Ice Cube Treats

Fill ice cube trays partially with seeds and/or pieces of fruit, then fill the rest of the way with water.

Freeze, then provide to your parrot for foraging fun. Many parrots enjoy holding ice cubes in a foot. This is an especially wonderful project for warm weather.

Ideas for the Littles



Cut into pieces a **fake grass doormat**. Put a piece in or on top of the cage and sprinkle with seeds and pellets. This is often a great way to introduce pellets and other new foods.

Small parrots like cockatiels and budgerigars are often happy to forage for greens, especially if these are wet when offered.





Luckily, this world holds a great many people who are far more creative than I. Check out the Facebook Group called [The Parrot's Workshop](#). In addition, great ideas can be found at the following websites:

www.foragingforparrots.com

www.parrotenrichment.com

www.makeyourownbirdtoys.com

www.cheeparrottoystips.com

The Parrot Who Doesn't Forage

Foraging in the wild is a learned activity, driven by the need to find food. Parents teach their fledglings where to find food and how to get at it. For example, black cockatoo parents show their young how to find the grubs hiding in fallen, rotting logs and how to dig them out.

The force of hunger doesn't drive our parrots when we present foraging opportunities, at least in the beginning. They are content to find food in their bowls, as they always have. Further, adult parrots are often neophobic – afraid of new things – including that toy you just made and hung in the cage.

Therefore, when you first begin to offer these new toys, your parrot may ignore them or even be afraid of them. It may be *you* who has to teach your parrot to interact with these items. This is not hard, if you develop a systematic approach. Once you understand the concept, you will be able to break down the introduction of any toy you might want to provide. The following is an example of how you might introduce a more complicated toy if your parrot is afraid of it or just unsure of how to interact with it at first.

Introducing the Egg Carton Toy

First, make the complete toy and offer it to your parrot to see how he reacts. Don't assume that he won't know what to do. If he acts afraid of it or ignores it for more than a few days, you may need to introduce it to him using a process like the one described in the following slides. *Do not proceed to each new step until your parrot eagerly enjoys his toy at the current level of difficulty.

Step One: Place a favorite treat inside of a 3 oz. Dixie cup and give it to your parrot. You can also hang it in the cage with a short piece of twine. All he has to do is to approach the cup and take the treat out of it. Keep doing this until he shows no hesitation when taking the cup and getting the treat out of it. This might take one time or twenty times, depending upon your individual parrot's age, nature and previous experiences with enrichment.



Introducing the Egg Carton Toy

Step Two: Put the treat into the cup and fold down one side over the treat and offer it to him. He should be able to peek in and see the treat.



Step Three: Put the treat into the cup and fold down opposite sides so that the treat is hidden. He should have the idea by now that a treat is awaiting him if he can get to it. This will take some problem-solving skills, since he will either need to pry up the sides or chew through the cup.



Introducing the Egg Carton Toy

Step Four: When he readily chews through the cup to access the treat, make it harder by crushing the cup firmly around the treat.



When your parrot eagerly chews into the cup to get the treat, you are ready to introduce him to the egg carton with the cups in the holes. This photo shows the preparation for this next step.



Introducing the Egg Carton Toy

Step Five: Once finished, this is how your foraging toy will look. Leave the carton open for now, since the sight of the cups will be familiar to him. His challenge now is to be brave enough to lift them out of the carton. Introduce this on a flat surface.



Step Seven: This step will be a big challenge for your parrot, since he will now have to figure out how to access the cups. The carton at this point is easy to open by lifting the top.

Introducing the Egg Carton Toy

Step Eight: This change is subtle and will only increase the difficulty of the toy. Now you will secure the carton closed with masking tape.



Step Nine: When your parrot is skilled at chewing into the carton, it will be time to introduce the difficulty of adding the paper bag. This may cause your parrot to hesitate because it looks so different. Place this on a flat surface to introduce.



Introducing the Egg Carton Toy

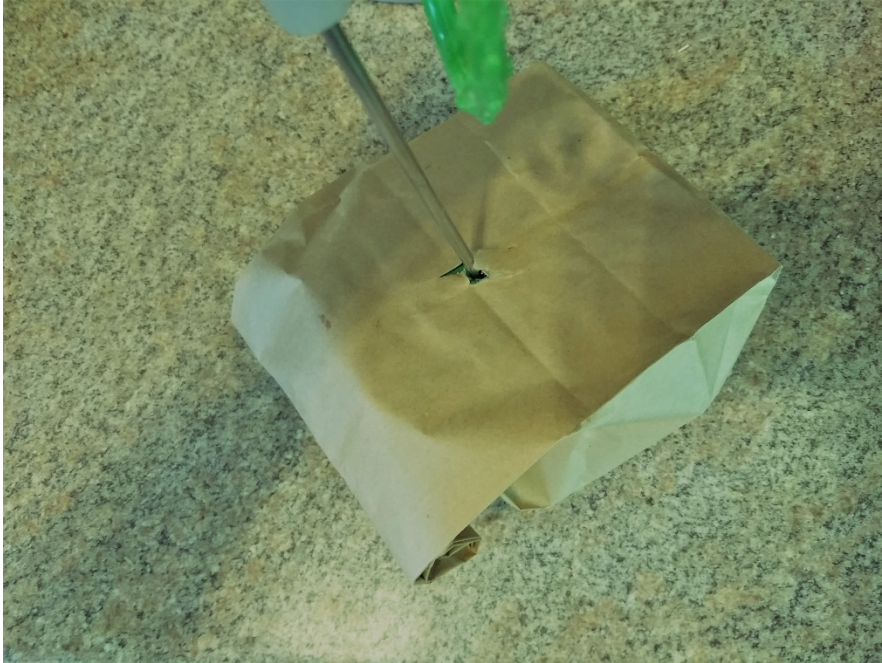
Step Ten: Now you will begin to fold over the top of the bag, which will slightly increase the level of difficulty; your bird will need to figure out how to open the bag.



Step Eleven: In order to increase the level of difficulty a bit further, you can now tape the bag closed. Now your parrot will have to chew through both the bag and the carton and the cups to get at the treats.



Introducing the Egg Carton Toy



Congratulations! You can now place the entire toy onto a SS skewer and hang in the cage. This simple change will now increase the difficulty for your parrot because the toy will move as he tries to access the treats. This entire toy takes only about five minutes to create, but may keep your parrot busy for 30 minutes!

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Kris Porter of www.parrotenrichment.com for her help in creating this pamphlet. While I may be the author, she is the originator of many of these ideas. She also contributed the vast majority of the photos used. I will be forever in her debt for helping me to better my own parrots' lives with easy-to-make, affordable toys.

Thanks are due also to Dina Shaban of Amman, Jordan for her contributions – the ice cube forager and the plastic straw forager.



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I hope that creating and introducing these toys to your birds has been an enjoyable and reinforcing experience for you all. I would welcome any feedback you might have so that this “living” booklet may continue to improve. Thanks, Pam