

## Foraging: Normal Bird Behavior and Activity



Wild parrots may spend the largest part of their day foraging for food. In captivity, with food given in a dish, the parrot may spend 20-30 minutes a day, with little to do the rest of the time. With changes to the bird's time allotment for feeding, less time is spent on destructive behaviors including "feather picking" or abnormal behaviors such as flipping, pacing, or rocking. Abnormal social interactions may include screaming and/or abnormal vocalizations, and inappropriate pair-bonding behaviors with the owner, often resulting in chronic egg-laying or aggression. The foraging lifestyle change can also be beneficial during behavioral modification treatments, training, and other interactions with humans or other birds.

Most wild birds do forage for food on the ground, and if foods are dropped, they can retrieve them. Cages with grates on the bottom prevent birds from retrieving foods, ripping up substrate, and searching for food or toy items. Newspaper works well as flooring for cages, with the top layers changed daily.

There are a lot of ways to create foraging opportunities for your bird.

- Shred greens such as leaf lettuce, parsley, or romaine, or use cut wheat grass. Scatter on the floor of the cage, and scatter pellets or other bits of fruits or vegetables throughout. This fresh forage material should be removed daily to prevent spoilage. Alternatively, shredded newspaper can be used (make sure it is non-toxic with soy-based ink – most non-shiny printed daily newspapers are safe but check with the newspaper).
- Wrap food dishes with newspaper or in non-toxic cardboard so the parrot must chew through the material to get to the food. You will have to teach the bird how to get to the dish, by either punching a starter hole, or by demonstrating the foraging activity yourself (rip into the material) and retrieve the food item. Do not share this piece of food with your bird – act like it is a treasure. Your bird will then really want to get a treasure too, and will tear into the wrapped dish when it is offered.

- Wrapping individual food items such as nuts, seeds, favorite fruit in pieces of paper, corn husks, or grape leaves, paper cups or other materials. Twist the end(s) closed. This requires chewing to get to the food item. Not every wrapper needs to have a food item. Let the bird observe you making these at first so that it learns what is inside.
- Foraging perches or wood blocks can be made with un-treated wood (such as maple, vine maple, willow, apple, dried Douglas fir, pine). Drill holes into it and stuff in nuts, seeds, treats – the reward should be visible, but not accessible without chewing down through some of the wood. Foraging perches can also be used in the cage, outside of the cage, and for training sessions.
- Puzzle toys are available that require the bird to manipulate pieces or unscrew parts to acquire food rewards. Food items can also be mixed in a shallow box or dish filled with wooden buttons or alfalfa pellets so that the bird must dig through it.
- Using food rewards as part of behavior training in addition to encouraging good food habits, can become part of the bird's daily activities, and greatly increase social interactions.

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