



Puzzles like the Nature's Instinct ZigZag make birds work for their food, providing both mental stimulation and physical activity.

Toys That Keep Birds Busy

Offer a variety of foraging and enrichment toys to help customers provide healthy, stimulating environments for their pets. *By Julia Ann Charpentier*

Unable to rely on the resources of Mother Nature, pet birds depend on whatever food and shelter their human caregivers provide. Birds cannot describe what they need or want. Instead, they demonstrate their dissatisfaction or frustration through behaviors such as screeching and pulling feathers.

Fortunately, it's possible to curb undesirable tantrums and self-mutilations by giving birds what their indoor surroundings may lack, including a variety of foraging and enrichment toys and devices.

Here's a look at several options you can offer to help bird owners provide a healthier, more stimulating environment.

Foraging Devices

Foraging feeding devices require birds to work for their food as they would in the

wild. Several are designed to dispense not only treats, but formulated diets.

For example, the Feeding System, part of the Creative Foraging Systems product line from Caitec Corp. (Baltimore), consists of polycarbonate feeding devices—available in horizontal and vertical configurations—that hold chipboard boxes with honeycomb inserts, inside which the

owner places food. The bird must chew through the inserts to get to the food within. This is a time-consuming process that fills the bird's day with instinctive activity.

"A domestically raised bird doesn't have the benefits of being taught by its parents or its flock members to forage," said Bill McGrath, senior vice president of Caitec. "So the pet owner has to teach the bird how to do it by providing devices, starting with entry-level products that are simple, and moving along to more complicated products to keep the bird challenged."

"The beauty of the Creative Foraging System, if you're a retailer, is that once birds begin to use products within our system, the consumer is not only inclined, but generally does, return to the store," McGrath added.

Similarly, the Original Forage Feeder by Avian Innovations (Hillsborough, N.C.) is designed to keep birds occupied. It was developed with the assistance of Dr. Greg Burkett, a board-certified avian veterinarian based in Durham, N.C., and originated with one of his clients.

Consisting of three colorful blocks with holes that can be filled with treats, food or both, the patent-pending device differs from competing brands, said Burkett, because it can hold enough food for several days. Burkett recommends starting with pellets or a formulated diet.

"When filled, a bird can easily reach the pellets and eat like normal," Burkett explained. "Within a few bites, this is not possible, and they have to begin the foraging process to get more of the food."

"It is not a replacement for foraging toys," he added, "because foraging and

tip

Instinct alone may not be enough to guide a sedentary bird into a physically productive lifestyle. Therefore, the owner might need to gradually introduce new activities to a perch-sitting bird. But, as with any species, it's easier to start when the bird is young.

70% In the wild, birds spend 70% of their time foraging.

Source: Avian Innovations

other toys are very important to avian enrichment."

Another refillable version, scheduled for release this summer, can be replenished with new wood blocks when the first ones are chewed away. Avian Innovations also plans to introduce several additional foraging tools within the next 18 months.

Like other foraging products, toys in the Nature's Instinct line, designed by Avian Inc. (Lakeland, Fla.) and recently sold to Catec Corp., encourage the kind of activity birds would perform in the wild.

"When we bring them into captivity, this natural behavior is completely stifled by placing a bowl of food or treats in front of the bird," said Nan Simon, vice president of Avian Inc. "Our toys are all puzzles designed to make birds think and work for their food. They provide both mental stimulation and physical activity as they try to solve the puzzles. This keeps the birds occupied, content and focused on healthy behavioral instincts."

Psychological Benefits of Foraging

BIRDS ARE NOT creatures that can be content in cages unless their owners provide exemplary conditions, said Bill McGrath, vice president of Catec Corp. (Baltimore).

"The bird is learning that he is becoming self-sufficient, that life within his environment is about making choices," he said. "If you take away the bird's ability to make choices, which most pet owners do, you're doing a tremendous amount of damage. His self-confidence disappears along with it, and he becomes more arrogant. He becomes more nippy, more self-defensive."

When they are allowed to make decisions—as they do with foraging—birds no longer behave badly because they are not aggressive by nature, McGrath said. "The bird can no longer go and just sit on the perch and be what we call a 'perch potato' and do nothing to feed itself. He doesn't sit there and screech all day. He's too busy looking for food."

Remember, foraging is intended to be much more than a distraction. The goal is to fill most of the bird's time with natural activity. Giving the bird multiple opportunities to do that will teach him that he really does have a choice.

—Julia Ann Charpentier

For example, the bird-toy design company created the Party Ball, also in the Nature's Instinct line, to double as a preening and foraging toy for medium to large birds. Stuffed with paper-mâché ribbons that birds can pull through small holes, the toy also has a treat hole for added incentive.

Games and More

Though foraging may fill most of its day, an energetic bird in captivity does more than feed. A companion bird develops a special relationship with its human playmate and enjoys interactive games and bonding toys. Innovative and

intellectually exciting products are available to meet these avian needs, too.

Birdie Basketball from Nature's Instinct, for example, lets owners teach their bird how to become a feathered Kobe Bryant. "Some birds are super at mimicking human behavior, and you can simply show them the treat, place it in the treat holder and make the basket," said Simon. "They see the treat dispense and are ready to play solo. With other birds, some repetition is necessary for them to become fluent in shooting hoops."

The Polly Wanna Necklace from Fetch-It-Pets, a family-owned business



JW PET CO. INC.

New Acti-loys from JW Pet's Insight line help combat birdie boredom.

shelflife

in Westlake Village, Calif., lets small and medium-sized birds bond with their owners, said president Vickie Canepa. "I made this toy because my birds love to sit on my shoulder. The necklace allows you to interact with your bird."

Captive birds also need toys to combat boredom, said Emilye Schmale, senior marketing manager for JW Pet Co. Inc. (Teterboro, N.J.). "Birds are curious and busy by nature," she said. "In the wild, birds are constantly foraging, interacting with the flock and flying great distances to get their needs met. They are rarely still except when at rest."

JW's Insight line of bird products includes ActiToys for parakeets, cockatiels, conures and other small parrots. Its latest offerings include The Harp, featuring a mirror and two bells on pulley chains; The Drum, featuring a mirrored surface and a drumstick on a beaded rope; and The Guitar, featuring plastic beads and bells.

Putting a customized spin on bird toys, Living World Create Your Own Toys from Rolf C. Hagen (USA) Corp.

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Fetch-It's Polly Wanna Piñata, available in several designs in pre-filled and fill-your-own versions, encourages birds to forage, preen, shred and chew.



Designed for medium to large birds, the Nature's Instinct Party Ball doubles as a preening and foraging toy.

(Mansfield, Mass.) let bird owners create unlimited individualized designs from wood and acrylic pieces. Designed for small, medium and large hookbill species, the resulting toys are designed to encourage birds' instincts to forage, preen, shred and chew.

"These are all activities that a bird would do in a natural environment, and it is important to provide an outlet for birds in the home," said Damian Hall, marketing manager. "It helps keep the bird stimulated and reduces stress."

Birds also enjoy the fun chewing texture of Fetch-It's Polly Wanna Piñata, made with extra thick cardboard, paper colored with natural dyes, and

a flour and water paste. Available in two sizes, the pre-filled piñatas come with a mixture of pineapples, papayas, raisins and banana chips. Polly Wanna Piñata also is available in a fill-your-own version.

"I had gotten a piñata for my son's birthday party, and my birds got to it and had such a great time playing with it, I knew that I had a winning product," said Canepa.

Look for the new Mini Penguin and Mini Snowman piñatas coming out for the 2009 holiday season.

Fetch-It-Pets also has a new collection of Surprise Box Toys filled with palm fiber, textured sea grass, beads and confetti paper, in several styles. All are equipped with treat flaps.

The savvy retailer will capitalize on birds' innate desires. So stock what your customers need to ensure cage life provides an invigorating experience with constant challenges. ■

Julia Ann Charpentier is a freelance writer based in Buffalo Grove, Ill.



Parrots fed from traditional dishes spend 15 to 27 minutes per day feeding. Birds that have made a complete transition to foraging for their food, however, must dedicate 4 to 6 hours per day to feeding activities.

Source: Calico Corp.



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