

# Teaching Your Pet Birds to Forage for Food

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### Simple Non-Food / Toy Foraging Opportunities

Training your Bird to Forage for Food:

Information provided by [Dr. Jill M. Patt, DVM](#)  
(other foraging ideas have been added by AvianWeb):

1. Keep using the bowl in which the bird was typically fed, but don't fill it to overflowing, put in just enough food for the day, and don't put the most favored treats in the bowl.
2. Now add several smaller foraging bowls all over the cage. Place these small bowls in the cage such that the bird must fully traverse its cage to get to all the bowls. Now place only a very small amount of a favorite treat in each of these bowls. It is important that the bird not reach the first bowl and eat its entire daily ration. We want to encourage the bird to move to and explore all the bowls.

#### Foraging / Treat Dispensers

At this point you are already providing the bird with more exercise than our formally sedentary parrot who sits on its one favorite perch all day.

When the bird has mastered finding treats in all the little bowls, begin to add a small piece of paper on top of each bowl so that the bird must push it off to get to the treat.

Advance from here to taping the paper on the bowl so the parrot must chew through the paper to get the treat. Some retail foraging bowls come



with lids that can be placed tightly so that the bird must work out how to undo the lid to get the treat. The idea being that as the bird masters each stage the foraging is made a little more physically and mentally demanding.

When your bird has become a master forager you can start to vary the routine somewhat and place a large variety of foraging toys in the cage. Some of the toys are now empty, some are filled with actual toys, and some are filled with small treats. You can also introduce some of the acrylic type toys that require an action such as opening a drawer, turning a wheel, or lifting a lid to get to the treat.

This applies to larger parrots only, of course - as small parrots don't have beaks that are strong enough: Offer [almonds](#) and other nuts in the shell. Hide them in something he/she can see but will have to dig for.

The below applies to any-size birds: Provide him/her healthy treats, like grapes\*, berries, apples, carrots -in foraging cups. You can do this by putting a piece of (blank) paper over a cup secured with a thick elastic band. (\*It is recommended not to feed more than one grape to a LARGE parrot a day. Less for smaller birds. Some birds have developed renal failure because of grapes.)

- Empty cereal boxes with toys or treats inside.
- Brown paper lunch bags with nuts and seeds hidden within.
- Fill organic / unbleached coffee filters with millet and / or other healthy treats and clip to the cage
- Clean cardboard egg cartons with favorite treats hidden inside.
- Inexpensive finch nests make great "foraging containe.." (Please refer to images below.) Hide your pet's favorite treats and toys in one and hang it up. Great "fillers" are shredded paper, treats, pine cones, natural leather pieces, bottle tops, bamboo balls. Hours or even days of fun are guaranteed
- Small Paper Cups or Paper Plates:

Wrap portions of your bird's daily diet in paper cups or folded paper plates tied with



short pieces of sisal, leather strips or thinner cotton rope.

Stack cups and hide food / treats in between the layers.

Place food / small treat in the cup, wad the cup into a ball and place in the cage or on the tree. The parrot must chew through the cup to get the treat.

Advanced stages of this include placing a tie around the cup and suspending it from the tree so that the bird must pull the cup up by the tie to allow access for chewing.

- Non-waxed Pine Cones: Pick up any pine cones that are freshly dropped. Soak pine cones in a dishpan with vinegar water (about a cup of vinegar to a gallon of water) for 10-15 minutes - this gets all the dirt and bugs out.

**(PLEASE NOTE: HEATED vinegar emits toxic fumes similar to carbon dioxide. Bird owners have lost their pets by adding vinegar to their dishwashing cycle, or used it to clean coffee machines.)** Then let them air-dry in a large colander for 24 hours. The second step is



to put the pinecones on a foil covered cookie sheet and bake at about 150 to 200 degrees for 20-30 minutes to kill bacteria, molds, etc. Obviously, let them cool down before giving them to your pets. Both big and small birds treasure them. Offer as is, wrapped in other things (paper, cups, folded paper plates) or stuff treats (nut butters with seeds or dried fruit) into the cones.

- Unbleached Coffee Filter Bag, bamboo Leaves, or Rice Paper Wrappers: Wrap your bird's healthy treats in a coffee filter, tie it shut and hang it up with a quick link or wedge it in a foraging tree. Note: The rice paper wrappers have to be soaked before becoming flexible.
- Dried food-grade bamboo leaves make great packets to hide treats and toys in.
- Shredded Paper provides great foraging opportunities for your pet. Fill a box - i.e. clean litter box, card board box, basket, a food dish, or any suitable container really - and hide in it your parrot's favorite toys and healthy treats. You will find your parrot busy looking for them for the longest time. If you don't have access to shredded paper, you can instead use Carefresh, which is a recycled newspaper bedding available at your local petstore. This makes for great foraging!
- Plastic Easter Eggs make great foraging toys. Drill a couple of holes in them, big enough to pull a chain or Sisal rope through to allow you to attach or hang them up on your pet's foraging tree or play gym. But before doing so, don't forget to fill the halves with treats, such as nuts or their favorite seeds. You may want to attach the halves loosely in the beginning until your parrot has figured out how to open them more easily.





- Paper: Wrap food, nuts or other treats (dry cereals, dried unsulphured fruits, dried hot peppers) in paper. Place in various areas of the cage.
- Cardboard Boxes: Wrap treats or food in small paperboard boxes, tie with sisal, leather strips or cotton cord.
- Vegetables and fruits served differently:
  - Hang up, weave or serve in stainless-steel skewers:
    - **Pomegranades** are favorite fruits of many parrots. They are seasonal fruits and it's best to stock up on pomegranade seeds and freeze some. These seeds have a high water content and freeze well. For feeding, drill a hole down the middle, stick a skewer through it and hang it from the roof of the cage. Your pet will enjoy getting the seeds out. This is a LOT of fun for parrots, but very messy. It is best to protect the walls and floor from spatters. You can also sprinkle the frozen pomegranade seeds as well as frozen grapes over your parrots' soft food mix. Those frozen fruits not only get more water in when eaten and entertain with their funny frozen texture, but also keep soft food mash from spoiling.
    - **Hang** carrots with the tops from the bars/top of the cage.
    - **Weave or hang** leafy greens from the cage bars/ top. Salad leaves are great, but also consider dandelions, which may grow in your garden and are extremely nutritious.
    - Serve **corn on the cob**; hanging it up, tying it to the cage bars or tree branches.
  - **Whole Fruits and Veggies:** A small apple or a small or half an orange, **leave grapes in a bunch\***, tangerines, ½ or ¼ chunks of red or yellow bell peppers, chunks of purple cabbage or radicchio, Brussels sprouts, broccoli (with the stems and tops). Corn-on-the-cob -- a huge hit with just about any parrot I know. Another fun fruit are whole star anise pods. Many birds love them. They don't always eat the seed, but they love ripping open the pods. You can wedge fruits and vegetables in vine balls or other shredding toys for your birds to pull out and chew up. But they also make great foot toys.
    - **\*For multiple-bird homes only.** It is not recommended to feed more than one grape to a LARGE parrot a day. Less for smaller birds. Some birds have developed [renal failure](#) because of grapes. Since owners have no control over how much each bird is eating, it's best to not feed grapes daily ...
  - **Bell Peppers** make great " foraging bowls" for birds. Cut the cap off of a bell pepper; cut out most of the white inner parts (leaving some seeds for them) and stuff it with their fresh-food diet. Put the cap back on and then skewered the whole thing onto their hanging stainless steel skewer.

- **Cucumber:** Slice off the top and use a sharp knife and a small spoon to scoop out the insides. Stuff the cavity with sprouts and minced veggies and skewer it sideways on their hanging skewer.
- Natural branches from outside provide hours of entertainment and nutrition. Please make sure that branches are clean, [non-toxic](#) and have not been sprayed with pesticides or other chemicals.. Use fresh branches from bird safe trees, including buds, leaves and fruits. Clean them before providing them to your birds to remove any toxins, insects, dirt, etc. - allow to dry. Please refer to the photos to the right for foraging ideas using natural branches. (Photos courtesy of Gay Noeth). Bare branches without leaves are okay, if fresh branches are not available.
- Tamale wraps can be used to make a great hidden treat. Again, place only a small amount of treat in the corn husk and wrap until fully covered and tie closed. Then allow the parrot to chew the tamale until the treat is revealed.
- Mini Pumpkins: Editable mini pumpkins are great foraging foods; for smaller birds cut in half, wiith larger parrots the whole fruit can be served. Many birds will accept them raw, others might prefer them cooked (until a fork sticks into it - not too soft). Some birds like them cut in small pieces, others like them whole. If left whole, it makes a great "shredding food" ... Do expect your pet to make a mess!  
Also make sure that the pumpkin is edible / not sprayed with pesticides, etc. Wash thoroughly before serving.



#### Foraging trays, baskets and buckets

1. Plain, uncolored wicker or palm fiber baskets
2. Plain brown paper bags from your grocery shopping
3. Cardboard boxes
4. **Plastic containers** (throw-aways from deli foods, small condiment containers) -  
Please note: Shannon Armstrong from the Joshua Rescue Foundation emphasized **not to use the Styrofoam containers** that some eateries use for take-outs. She points out:
  - Styrofoam containers are DEADLY to birds. The Styrofoam is static and sticks to the inside of the mouth and throat. [T]hen it forms a static mass ... and kills the bird.
5. Stainless steel buckets can be purchased from feed-and-supply stores or pet supply stores.

Fill any of the above with shredded paper and hide treats, foot toys, beads of various sizes, pine cones, grains, paper balls, leather pieces / strips, sisal rope, cotton or leather strips.

Attach to the cage or place on top.

This will provide hours of entertain and fun to your bird!

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Recommended Web Resources: [Redirecting Negative Behaviors in your Petbird](#) for some excellent tips and tricks ... [Bird Proof Your Home to Protect Your Furniture and Keep your Bird Safe](#) ... [Top Bird Killers](#) ... [Toxicities](#) ... [Toy Safety](#) ... [Aviary Photos](#) / [Indoor Set-ups](#)

- What can be more fun than allowing your bird to be outside -- to be part of nature; safely and under your supervision. Please check out the [Avianweb EZ Bird Harness](#) - there is nothing that could possibly enhance your pet's life more ... A great product.

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