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Home Avian Behavior Program

Wild parrots perform daily behaviors including feather care, foraging, and social interaction. These are essential for wild bird survival and also essential for behavioral and mental wellness for pet parrots. It is best to provide all three of these activities. Our pet parrots already know how to care for their feathers and how to forage. They do need help or “leadership” in the social interaction area. The trained and socialized parrot is less stressed, better nourished, and is more resistant to disease. Well-trained and socialized pet birds are truly a pleasure.

Socialization and Training

Hand-raised parrots tend to look at people as the same kind of bird that they are. In the wild or in captive parent raised and socialized settings, other flock members would teach the young parrot how to behave and interact by trial and error. It is important that the owner take the role as “flock leader” to help show the way. Repetitive training and reward for some basic behaviors provide a great basis to launch from. These behaviors start with:

1) Step-Up/Step Down AND 2) Stay on perch.

1. “Step-Up”: Most hand-reared birds have some skills in this area but practice is perfect! Touch the front of the legs with your hand and clearly state “Step-up.” Your bird can also be cued with out a verbal command. When the bird steps on your hand, slowly and firmly raise it. Provide a firm and solid perch with your hand – a shaking, hesitant or unsure hand will not be a desirable perch for most birds to transfer their weight to. If your bird is not tame, you may have to start by “bribing” your bird to your hand by offering a small piece of a nut or seed. If the bird does not respond immediately then eat the reward in front of them (with obvious relish) and try again later. When they do step onto your hand to get to the bribe, lift your hand and the bird should hold on and follow your motion.



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2. “Step-Down”: Stepping down is important simply to allow for you to guide your bird’s movement. To step your bird down, with your hand positioned lower than the perch you desire it to go to, gently roll your hand towards the perch, shifting the bird’s weight forward so that they step down. In most cases, the bird should be encouraged to grasp the perch with it’s beak, and then climb up to the perch from there. In this sense, the bird is actually climbing up when being stepped down most of the time.

3. “Stay”: Staying on a perch, where placed, is important for your bird to experience “normal” flock social interaction while outside of its cage with you. This simple behavioral requirement will allow your bird to share time with you, but not on you, and will not allow your bird to have free roam throughout the home. The free-roaming pet parrot is significantly positioned for increased risk of traumatic injuries and household poisonings. Behaviorally, the free-roaming pet parrot will be at risk of developing pair bonded interactions with one person, and may be less able to be guided into general flock interactions with others in the home. Portable table-top perches are great for this training since they can be put anywhere and are not usually higher than people. Set your bird on the perch and occasionally offer a stroke or reward—as long as they stay put. If they climb down and walk around, put them back without any verbal cue or other reward. Come back a few minutes later and offer a reward if they stay put, or work to devise other positive reinforcement methods that will help your bird decide that staying on the training perch is a desired thing – from their point of view.

Foraging Behaviors and Their Applications in the Home

If “normal” social interaction with their adoptive family/flock is limited, as is often the case when their human companions are away earning a living, the other maintenance behavioral groups (foraging and feather care) must be increased to fill the deficit. If the total foraging activity of a pet parrot consists only of eating out of a dish, feeding activities may not occupy much more than 20 - 30 minutes a day. Depending on the species of parrot, their wild counterparts often will devote 6 -18 hours a day foraging. Merely by increasing the daily foraging activities of a pet parrot, the daily lifestyle can be enhanced in an ornithologically sound manner; this in turn



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may be very beneficial as a part of behavioral modification treatments for abnormal behaviors in the other maintenance categories of feather care and social interaction. Abnormal feather care often includes “feather picking” or other feather damaging behaviors, and abnormal social interaction problems may include screaming and other abnormal vocalization, and pair bonding behaviors.

Enhancing Foraging Behaviors

Try some of these creative enhancement techniques, if they are applicable for your bird:

1. Foraging perch: A piece of non-treated wood (e.g., pine lumber) drilled with holes into which nuts, seeds, or other treats fit tightly. The reward should be visible but not accessible without chewing down through the wood. This perch material can be used with your training perch, when the bird is outside of the cage with you. The wood can also be used as a perch in the cage, or even hung in the cage to increase the challenge.
2. Wrapping food bowls: Wrap the food bowls with newspaper or cardboard so that your bird has to spend time chewing in to get at the food. You may have to teach your bird the first time by punching a starter hole, or simulating the foraging activity yourself, acquiring your bird’s favorite food item, and not sharing it with the bird after you find it.
3. Wrapping food items: You can individually wrap nuts, seeds, or other rewards in small pieces of paper, corn husks or other materials. Wrapped with a twisted end, the treat becomes an ice cream cone that requires some chewing to get at the tasty surprise inside. Not all wrappings need to contain a reward, either.
4. Mixing food with inedible items: Pellets or seeds can be mixed in with wood buttons or other items so that the bird has to dig through to find its food. Some parrot species can be particularly stimulated into new foraging behaviors by having a “sandbox” provided, in which some desired food items or treats can be found.
5. Puzzle toys: There are a variety of toys available that require birds to unscrew parts or manipulate components to get at their reward.



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6. Trick training: By asking your bird to perform a desired behavior for a treat or reward, you are, in essence, providing a modified foraging activity for your bird. In addition, you are also having a lot of fun!

Feather Care

Efforts to enhance, modify and guide of feather care has very solid influence on your bird's daily maintenance activity schedule. For those birds that are not preening normally, (either too much or too little), there are some ways that feather care can be enhanced and guided more toward normalcy:

1. Mist your bird lightly every day, and sometimes even multiple times each day. Unless your bird is sick or your house is very cold (less than 60°F), you do not need to be concerned about cold-stress, particularly if it is just lightly misted. A light misting dampens the feathers of the bird enough to guide its feather care towards more normal preening activity for a short time period.
2. Misting can be combined with time that is shared with your bird out on a training perch. This combines flock interaction with feather care, and the combination of these two behavioral groups can enhance the lifestyle of your parrot, if not help to modify undesired behaviors.
3. Offer materials for your bird to "groom" that can be destroyed if the bird so-desires. These may include a straw whisk broom, a feather duster or other similar materials that can be located in the cage or on the side of your bird's cage. Take some time and groom or preen these while your bird observes. These types of items may provide something other than the bird's own feathers to preen and groom (or damage), and can have great value as a part of or adjunct to behavioral modification for some feather damaging behaviors.

-adapted from the Medical Center for Birds Series; Dr. Brian Speer.