

Feather conditioning

An eight part series on making your bird look like the “**BEST IN SHOW!**” Or how to reduce your wild bird’s stress. (They are wild animals!)

ADVANCED BIRDIE QUIZ

What three activities are high priority for wild birds?

What is one theory of why birds tear up toys?

What two major wild bird activities are eliminated in most homes?

The stress I feel when I’m looking in the refrigerator, then the cupboards, and finally rummaging through the clutter on the kitchen counter is not an enjoyable activity for me, especially when I’m trying to find something to eat. Do I have to go to the grocery store to “forage” for something I’d like? I would prefer not to forage for my food, but what about my bird? From what I’ve heard, it’s all the rage (if you spend a lot of time hanging out in a cage).

If you get the idea that I’m a convinced advocate of foraging to help reduce feather destruction, you would be right. If we continue with the premise that our pet birds would do better if we simulated their wild environment as closely as possible, we should make it clear that there are three necessities that are top priorities for wild animals: Shelter, reproduction, and food. For our birds, we have provided them shelter with a safe home, free of weather changes and most predators and a daily, endless supply of food.

Yet their normal behavior, flying around the jungle, grassland or whatever habitat they prefer, is restrained even if the bird is not locked up in a cage throughout the day. Why are they flying around? They are looking for a mate and reaching food resources.

Birds in the wild do travel about collecting food from a number of set foraging locations. Small birds such as finches seek seeds, grains, worms and insects. Larger birds tend to seek nuts, berries, frogs, snakes, mice and insects. They do not wake up in the morning and say to themselves “I have to look everywhere today for food.” No, they have specific locations where food and water is usually available. If a certain area in their territory is played out

they would fly to a different station, find a supply of food and, in most cases, call to the other birds in the area that food is available. The wild birds also tend to eat a larger variety of foods than we present them in captivity.

If we continue with the premise that we should attempt to simulate their wild habits, then foraging would be important. If we take away the second high priority of food gathering by just filling food bowls, it would seem our pet bird's last big worry is reproduction - and if that's not an option, the result could be they bite, scream, tear toys to pieces, perhaps simulate nest building, and when the toys are gone, start yanking feathers out. Sex therapy for birds seems a long way off. Perhaps if we introduce the food gathering priority as a positive normal activity, it may help the unwanted activities subside.

Try setting up feeding stations with different types of food in smaller portions than you would for a single feeding cup. For larger birds, place two nuts in one station, a tablespoon of pellets in an additional station, egg food, a frog in another (just kidding but a piece of cooked chicken might do), birdie bread, a fresh vegetable or fruit assortment, nutriberries, seed, and finally one completely empty. If you've counted that up you could have ten food stations! Ten food stations aren't necessary, but do be creative!

Place food cups or foraging stations in different parts of the cage. Using half the stations and half the types of offerings in the morning and the other in the evening would give them some variety. Remember to provide smaller portions in each. For small birds the options would be pellets, seed, egg food, sprouts, dried insects, mealworms, birdie bread, fresh fruit or vegetables. And please remember, it is always important to research, from reliable sources such as guidebooks, exactly what your birds would eat in the wild.

Food gathering or foraging is pretty high on the list of necessary tasks in the wild. If we eliminate food foraging, then our pet birds have one last major activity on their mind all day and you know what that is!

I'm getting hungry. "Dear...do we have anything besides these vegetables?"

Next month: TOYS

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