



Enrichment toys often combine various natural materials to encourage birds to explore and chew while they swing and climb. The Forage-n-Play Perch from Super Pet, a brand of Central Avian and Small Animal, fills that bill.

## Great New Bird Toys

A busy bird is a happy bird. That's a super premise for selling new foraging, chewing, activity and interactive bird toys. By Lisa Plummer

As highly intelligent, active and social creatures, parrots and smaller hookbills in the wild spend most of their time foraging, flying, avoiding predators, nesting, socializing in their flock and playing. Their captive counterparts, however, cannot engage in these natural behaviors. These birds often become bored, restless and depressed—and then develop a host of behavioral problems, including screaming, biting and feather plucking, that can baffle and bedevil bird owners.

The solution? Provide environmental enrichment to keep birds occupied.

“The more intelligent an animal or a being is, the more environmental and behavioral enrichment is requisite to its overall mental health,” said Deb White, owner of Super Bird Creations L.L.C. (Grand Junction, Colo.) and a longtime bird owner who understands firsthand the importance of satisfying birds’ instinctual needs. “Parrots have generally been described as having an intellectual capacity of a 3- to 5-year-old

human. Imagine a child locked in a small room with nothing to do and no one to interact with most of the day, or imagine an adult having only one book to read or one TV program to watch over and over again. That wouldn't be a very fulfilling or interesting existence.”

Toys play a crucial role in environmental enrichment. When birds play with toys, they practice instinctual behaviors such as foraging and nest building. In addition, they expend energy, develop coordination and dexterity, and work off their natural aggression. Toys even keep birds’ beaks and nails healthier.

Bird hobbyists have understood the importance of environmental enrichment for years, and today, a number of companies produce toys designed to mentally and physically challenge birds. Let's look at some of the latest offerings.

### Foraging and Chewing Toys

Parrots in the wild spend up to 70 percent of their day foraging for food, so working for snacks comes naturally to pet

birds. They act on those instincts with foraging toys, which require them to work to get toys or edible treats that are hidden, skewered or embedded inside. Depending on the complexity of the toy and the craftiness of the bird, foraging toys can keep birds busy for extended periods of time. No wonder foraging toys represent a big trend in the bird toy category.

One example from Brainy Bird Toys (Bremerton, Wash.) is the Busy Boo Foraging Treat Tube, a simple yet clever toy made from long-lasting PVC pipe. Birds must work to retrieve dry treats through half-inch holes drilled into the sides of the transparent tube. A smart cockatoo could probably figure out how to remove the caps from the ends of the tube to get at the treats, but most birds choose the hard way, said Sandy O'Hearn, co-owner of Brainy Bird Toys.

“They actually prefer to get the treat out of those holes,” O'Hearn said. “By seeing their favorite treat, they will work diligently to seek a way to get it out. Some will work for hours just to get to that goodie.”

Similarly, the Can-O-Nuts from Sweet Feet & Beak (Clermont, Ga.), a cylinder-shaped toy made of unbreakable polycarbonate, has beak-sized holes in the sides and top to promote foraging behavior.

Some foraging toys feature lidded jars or cups that birds must learn to manipulate in order to get at the toys or treats inside. Examples include the Peek-a-Treat and Triple Treat hanging toys from Brainy Bird Toys and the 4 Way Forager from Super Bird.

A number of toys promote foraging and chewing or shredding. The whimsical Coconut Craze from Brainy Bird Toys,



The award-winning Super Shredder Ball from Sweet Feet & Beak, made of hand-woven, all-natural jute mesh, is stuffed with vibrant paper streamers.

for example, hides a natural vine ball, chewable wood pieces, bamboo finger wraps and wrapped pine nuts in multicolored shredded paper inside two coconut halves. Its bright colors and multiple textures are irresistible to inquisitive birds, O'Hearn said.

The Foraging Basket from Super Bird also features a plethora of safe, nontoxic chewable components. Made of all-natural rattan, the basket contains a large vine twist, wood Popsicle sticks and ice cream spoons, loofahs and palm leaf finger traps. Birds can destroy the contents while hunting for treats concealed inside.

Super Bird also offers the Busy Birdie Play Perch, a multifunctional toy featuring a colorful variety of natural materials, and the Barrel of Fun, a tube-shaped hanging chewable toy adorned with colorful wooden pieces inside and out.

Other safe-to-chew, natural, nontoxic options include Ultimate Polly Wanna Piñatas from Fetch-It Pets (Westlake Village, Calif.). Available in several brightly colored animal-themed styles, the piñatas are made of cardboard, wicker, vines, coconut pieces, palm fiber, bamboo and wood. Owners can use the "back door" to fill them with treats or toys.

Also from Fetch-It-Pets, Surprise Box Toys, available in circular swings and hanging designs, feature three small, shreddable boxes containing natural surprises, such as palm strips and confetti.

"All of our bird toys are made with at least four different natural materials to provide the ultimate shredding, chewing and preening experience," said Vickie Canepa, president of Fetch-It-Pets. "When I design our bird toys, I want to make them challenging, mentally stimulating and use many different natural materials and textures to provide a fun, healthy playtime experience."

Another shred-and-chew option is the award-winning Super Shredder Ball from



Several toys promote foraging and chewing or shredding. The Coconut Craze from Brainy Bird Toys hides a natural vine ball, chewable wood pieces, bamboo finger wraps and wrapped pine nuts in multicolored shredded paper inside two coconut halves.

Sweet Feet & Beak. The hand-woven, all-natural jute mesh hanging toy is stuffed with vibrantly colored paper streamers and wooden pieces.

Sweet Feet & Beak's Shred Master is a good choice for birds that particularly love to shred paper. The hard plastic dispenser-style toy allows birds to pick paper out a little at a time rather than unroll it all at once. Paper refills also are available.

Manufacturers say demand for bird toys, especially for foraging toys, is on the upswing. "The foraging toys are what's hot," said Kimble Johnakin, co-owner of Sweet Feet & Beak. "I think a lot of big-box stores had cut their bird departments back somewhat and they're now beefing it back up to the size it was year before last, so I've seen an upswing."

### Activity Toys

Birds, like humans, need regular exercise. Therefore, toys that promote physical activity help ensure birds' health and longevity.

One such toy is the Hanging Bird Gym from Scooter Z's Bird Toys and Cage Accessories (Tukwila, Wash.). Made of birch, rope, leather and plastic components, the colorful gym features three perches—each with its own toy. It can hang inside or outside of the cage or on a bird stand.

"It's a fun, hanging functional toy that not only stimulates the minds of companion birds but gives their body a workout too," said Scooter Z's owner Sunchea Phou.

Speaking of exercise: Birds can spend hours climbing, shaking, ringing and hanging from the Indestructabell from Sweet Feet & Beak, but they won't be able to break through the transparent blue polycarbonate outer bell to get to the smaller metal bell inside.



Ultimate Polly Wanna Piñatas from Fetch-It Pets, available in several animal-themed styles, are made of safe-to-chew, natural cardboard, wicker, vines, coconut pieces, palm fiber, bamboo and wood.

"That toy will last for years and years," said Johnakin. "The polycarbonate plastic is literally bulletproof!"

Also designed to promote natural activity is the Forage-n-Play line from Super Pet, a brand of Central Avian and Small Animal (Elk Grove Village, Ill.). Combining various natural materials, including wood, paper, sisal and loofah, the perches, swings and ladders provide visual and textural stimuli that encourage birds to explore and chew while they swing, climb and play.

Items in the Activitoys Carnival Toys line from JW Pet Co. Inc. (Teterboro, N.J.) are designed to pique a smaller bird's natural curiosity and satisfy its need to touch and manipulate objects. The Peck-a-mole features a rattling swivel hammer that the bird can lift and move. The Shooting Gallery has duck and bottle toys that the bird can spin, plus a fun-to-toss red ball on a chain. The Strong Bird features a pull handle on a chain: When the bird tugs the handle, it moves the colorful ball inside and rings the bell at the top. All three toys bolt to the cage.

"We have taken classic carnival games and created unique and different bird toys that will not only entertain small birds but will also engage their minds and bodies," said Emilye Schmale, JW Pet's director of marketing. "This type of toy teaches a bird that their actions produce a reward for a learned behavior, which encourages repeat play and helps prevent boredom."

Puzzle toys represent another way to engage birds' brains. Examples from Sweet Feet & Beak include the Treasure Chest, a transparent green plastic box filled with multicolored wood pieces; and the Chew Popper, a transparent green or pink plastic pencil case-shaped box filled with colorful Popsicle sticks. Birds have to figure out how to pull the wood pieces through holes in the plastic boxes.

Foraging toys—one of the biggest trends in the bird toy category—stimulate birds' problem-solving abilities. With the 4Way Forager from Super Bird Creations L.L.C., for example, the bird must manipulate the acrylic cups' weighted lids to access the treats inside.



## Interactive Toys

Another important aspect of bird well-being is owner and bird interaction. This emerging trend in the toy marketplace couldn't be better for the animals, said Michael Clark, avian product development manager for Super Pet.

"We feel if people spend more time interacting with their bird, it'll improve their experience and understanding of the animal they're sharing their life with," Clark said. "People will keep their birds longer and birds will be more entertained and healthier."

With the human-bird bond in mind, Super Pet recently launched the Habitat Defined Enrichment Pod line of foraging and interactive toys, which either store treats or require the owner to administer rewards when the bird uses the toy. For example, bird and owner can enjoy the Habitat Defined Enrichment Pod-Birdie Basketball together: When the bird puts the ball in the hoop, the owner reinforces the correct behavior with a treat.

Unlike most toys that hang from the top of the cage, the Enrichment Pods attach to the back or sides of the cage to encourage the bird to move around and use more of its environment, Clark said.

Polly Pops Foot Toys, Super Pet's first foray into the foot toy category, encourage human-bird interaction and

simultaneously promote foot health and dexterity. Recommended for use when the bird is outside its cage, interacting with its owner, the texture-based toys combine wood, paper, twine, loofah and other natural materials.

On the other hand, pet owners and small and medium-sized birds can make music together with the Birdie Piano from Scooter Z's, shaped like a cartoon apple with eight piano keys.

"The interaction between the bird, piano and owner helps build a stronger bond and provides additional socialization, which is important to a bird's mental and emotional health," said Phou. "Who knows, we might discover a few musical bird geniuses!"

## Selling Bird Toys

Manufacturers agree that nothing moves environmentally enriching bird toys faster than allowing customers to see birds enjoying these types of toys in in-store habitats.

"A bird's enthusiasm with a new toy is the best advertising money can buy," said Schmale. "Make sure to keep store-use toys fresh and new, and rotate them often so that the birds are actively engaged with the item in their habitats."

If you do not sell live birds, however, "it can be helpful to merchandise toys and



Toys from the Habitat Defined Enrichment Pod line from Super Pet promote foraging behavior or encourage bird and owner interaction.

accessories together by bird size. Make it simple for consumers to know which item is appropriate for their bird," Schmale added.

Consider creating special "trade-up" promotions, giving customers discounts on new toys when they bring in old toys or accessories. Or offering free accessories and toys when they purchase a new cage, said Schmale.

Because toys are crucial to birds' well-being, market them as you would treats and food, suggested Clark.

"If [retailers] market their toy department the way they market their treat department, they can start to have their employees do add-on sales," said Clark. "Whenever someone buys a new bag of food, they should buy a new treat and a new toy. Train employees and customers to understand what the toy category is—that it shouldn't be an optional thing."

Educating staff to relay the importance of mental and physical enrichment through toys is the key to increasing your bird toy sales—and to earning repeat business from bird owners.

"Retailers should do whatever they can to educate their customers to understand that just because it's called a toy doesn't mean it's trivial, that there's a purpose and a responsibility to providing these kinds of products to their animals," said White. ■

*Lisa Plummer is a freelance writer based in Las Vegas.*



Toys that promote exercise via perches, swings, ladders and more represent another important trend. The Hanging Bird Gym from Scooter Z's Bird Toys and Cage Accessories features three perches—each with its own toy.



Small birds can entertain themselves by moving the rattling swivel hammer of the Peck-a-mole, part of the Activitoys Carnival Toys line from JW Pet Co. Inc.

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