

Behavioral Issues and Redirecting Attention

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Behavioral problems are a common issue seen in companion avian species. These can manifest as feather plucking or chewing, self-mutilation, and screaming. Reproductive disorders may be encountered as well and can include excessive egg laying, masturbation, and cloacal prolapsing. When encountering these types of problems it's always best to have your bird be evaluated by a veterinarian as there are other medical disorders that can cause these signs. However, if behavioral causes have been incriminated as the source of the problem seen in your bird, there are important things to work on to help your bird resolve its issues.

An important place to start when discussing behavioral issues is to consider what is normal and natural. In the wild, birds perform a few basic behaviors during their waking hours.

These include searching for and eating food, socializing, grooming, and performing reproductive tasks. Estimates vary but approximately 60% of this time is searching, or foraging, for food. One problem with captivity is that when we offer food in a dish the bird knows where the meal is at all times and does not have to work at all to find it. This means that 60% of their day looking for and eating food is reduced to only a small percentage of their day. Ultimately this means that birds will divert their attention to one of those other behaviors: socializing, grooming or reproducing. As these tasks take up more time they can turn into the above behavioral issues mentioned.

In order to deal with these behavioral issues, it is best to consult with an avian veterinarian in order to determine the root cause of the problem and develop a behavioral modification treatment plan. Often, part of the treatment plan will involve directing a bird's attention away from the problem behavior and focusing it on a more productive, acceptable behavior. This often involves getting the patient back to the more normal, natural behaviors. A great place to start is getting a bird to forage for its food. Other things to consider are offering interactive toys and trick training. Each of these will be discussed in turn.



To review, foraging is defined as the act of searching for and exploiting food resources. We can make our birds do this in captivity by hiding food throughout the cage in multiple places. There are many ways that this can be done but it is important to know that the bird must be taught how to forage. Owners can start this with their birds by first covering up the food in the regular dish with some sort of easily removable barrier, such as a tissue or piece of paper. The bird has to remove the object to get to the food. Once they figure this out, the next step is to wrap pieces of the food up in paper so that they have to rip into the paper to get the food.

Once a bird recognizes that its food is stashed inside of these pieces of paper, you can start to move these to different parts of the cage. It's best to start by hanging them close to the food dish. As the bird starts to get the hang of things, the food-filled paper objects can be moved to different locations all over the cage. People will next often ask how they are supposed to hang these things around the cage. There are many ways this can be done, but one way is to place the items inside of specially designed or homemade foraging toys.

There are many commercial foraging toys available that you can find through a variety of sources (www.Caitec.com, www.drsfostersmith.com, www.mysafebirdstore.com, petmart, petco, etc.). They are often made of plastic and can be used again and again, or are made of destructible material and can be used until the bird decides to completely tear them apart. I recommend having a few of each, especially the plastic ones, since they can be used more than a single time. You can also make foraging toys at home out of cardboard objects like cereal boxes or paper towel rolls. For each foraging system, only put a small amount of food in each toy so they have to work hard to get a small reward. This causes them to want to keep searching and looking for more items to eat.

One additional recommendation I make is that you purchase several commercial foraging toys but only use a few at a time. This way, once a bird has figured a toy out well, you can switch it to a new one so they are not bored. Rotating through these toys keeps their mind stimulated. Use a new homemade foraging toy on a daily basis so there is always something new and exciting to destroy every day! There are many ways to make a bird forage and it's important to know that the limit of what you can do is your own imagination!

Another tip for directing a bird's attention away from unhealthy behaviors is to offer toys that it can interact with. Offering different colors, textures and toy types are important. Some are meant to be destroyed while others are puzzle-like. Some are quite intricate and require more complex thought while interacting with. Other toys make stimulating sounds or even talk to the bird when they press a button. It is important to note that toys should be rotated, just like foraging systems, in order to keep a bird interested and always thinking! Also,



people will often get upset when a bird destroys a toy and they need to buy a new one. The fact is this is what birds do. They destroy things and it is natural and normal for them to do this. If toys are getting too expensive you can always make things from materials around the house. Pieces of cardboard, toilet paper rolls, rope, bottle corks, and plastic bottle caps can all function as toys if presented in an appropriate manner.

Trick training is another way to get a birds mind off of problem behaviors and on to something more acceptable. As everyone knows, parrots are smart! Learning new things keeps their minds sharp and stimulated. Also, training tricks can be fun for owners! Most birds know the command "step up" but there are many other things you can teach a bird to do on command. Examples of things to teach a bird include how to wave, turn around, and spread their wings. Many other fun tricks can be taught and more ideas can be found in bird magazines or on popular websites like You-Tube.

Ultimately, all these recommendations are focused on one goal: that the bird is given something productive and stimulating to do with its free time during the day. These tasks can dissuade a bird from problem behaviors and get them focused on healthy, purposeful ones. This can lead to reduced stress, a calmer bird and ultimately a happier and healthier life! One last thing to mention is that all these topics discussed don't have to be thought of as treatment options, they can be thought of as preventative measures. A young, middle aged, or older bird who doesn't have any behavioral issues can also be taught these tasks in order to prevent behavioral issues, and also relieve boredom and have a happy, healthy, well-adjusted life.