

Northern Oaks
Bird & Animal Hospital

Foraging & Roosting

Getting Started

What is Foraging?

Foraging is encouraging pet parrots to seek and hunt to find food in a natural way. This is in contrast to the classical 'bowl of food' presentation for our pets. Parrots are naturally wired to be curious to seek out food stuffs, yet they may also be suspicious of changes in their immediate environment (cage and cage furniture). Parrots view new objects and foods with suspicion. For this reason, pet parrots often need to be 'taught' to forage. This is best done initially with treats that are extremely high value.

What is Roosting?

Wild parrots move in the morning from their overnight sleeping areas to various foraging grounds to search of food. These sleeping areas are called **Roost Sites**. Parrots, being native to areas closer to the earth's equator, are well adapted to receiving approximately 12 hours of daylight per day. In captivity, parrots are often be exposed to over 16 to 20 hrs of light with evening lighted home environments and this is not natural or beneficial.

Why Are These Important?

Realizing that the majority of our parrots have the mental capability of a 3-5 year old human child, yet only the emotional stability of a 2 year old human child is helpful. Rest is vital, and changes are not always welcome. They become easily bored but are also afraid of change and require mental stimulation. Patience is imperative. Our feathered friends need sufficient mental stimulation and rest they may be missing from their native, natural environment.

A reasonable time frame for our pet parrots to learn and enjoy foraging is several weeks to a few months. It may even take up to one year for a parrot to learn full foraging.

The positive results of a busy, interactive pet parrot are reduced day time vocalization (still expect the usual morning and evening 'calling' rituals), and often a reduced level of boredom and feather destruction.

Practical Use of Roosting (with separate cages)

Adequate rest is of great benefit to our parrots, just like young children. Consider having a separate **Night** cage (for roosting) that is smaller and only has basic perches and water bowls. This night cage should be away from busy evenings of noise and extended lighting. Ideally, plan for close to 12 hours of dark, quiet rest for your parrot.

In the morning move your parrot to a **Daytime** cage to start foraging for the day. Moving your parrot from a night cage to a larger daytime cage also allows for more social interaction between owner and parrot. This daytime cage is filled with toys and foraging bowls allowing for activity and busyness during the day hours.

Successful Foraging

1. GETTING STARTED:

It is important that your bird is in good health, has had a recent examination with your veterinarian, and ideally has had routine wellness health testing (blood, fecal tests, etc). It is also critical that your bird is weighed, and to monitor this weight at regular intervals (according to your veterinarian's advice).

The DVD 'Captive Foraging' by Dr. Scott Echols is available on Amazon, and should be watched several times, at least once a month during this conversion to foraging behavior for your bird.

The following suggested steps will help with this transition. This is worth the time investment for the emotional and mental stability of your bird.

2. TREATS:

While the goal of foraging is to eventually have all food found by foraging, initially foraging will begin by using high value treats only, with regular food available in the usual bowl at all times.

Foraging is comparable to running a marathon, training is required. Both activities, marathons without training, or foraging without teaching your bird, are destined for failure. Correct foraging needs to be daily, well motivated, and simple. This should be a great source of fun and bonding for you and the bird.

To start foraging we have to identify what is a treat for the bird... nuts and seeds are ideal because they are usually well accepted, dry (won't mold quickly), and can be quite small. **Remember 'treats' in more than small amounts become 'staples' and quickly lose our birds' interest.** Reserve these special treats ONLY for foraging training.

3. GRADUAL STEPS:

It is best to begin foraging training with a new 'treat' bowl (with a nervous bird place new bowl in same place as regular bowl).

- To encourage acceptance, start by putting 2-4 treats (a small size) in treat bowl.
- Throughout the training, the regular bowl is available with regular foods containing no 'treats', instead reserve treats for foraging.
- Over a few days, add 2-4 dried beans (kidney beans or other) into treat bowl along with 2-4 treats.
- By end of first week have one layer of dried beans with 2-4 treats on top and visible.
- The next week add a second layer of dried beans with twice the amount (4-8) treats partially mixed between the dried beans.
- After ensuring good acceptance with continued treats and dried beans in the separate treat bowl, consider adding a small amount of regular food (pellets are ideal if well accepted) to the treat bowl.

- Next, add dried beans to the regular food bowl. This continues to support the practice of foraging with regular food (you have already started putting some regular food in the treat bowl).
- By end of the second week have one layer of dried beans with on top covering the regular food bowl.

During this time there are two bowls. One with regular food covered with layer of dried beans as well as the treat bowl with treats and more and more regular (ie pellets) foods.

4. PROGRESSIVE:

Eventually, explore other foraging habits using desirable treats. Another foraging suggestion follows:

- Cut a small paper lining from a lunch bag to cover the bottom of a second food bowl.
- Over a few days increase size of small paper lining so it gets bigger.
- Gradually the paper is bigger and curls up the sides of the bowl.
- The paper eventually becomes a little larger than the bowl.
- The paper liner is next closed over the treats so the paper has to be torn open by the bird to get to the treats. These small pieces of paper each contain a single treat (looks like a Hersey Kiss), with many of these wrapped 'Hersey Kisses' treats available in the treat bowl.
- The final transition is to have many of these 'Hersey Kisses' all contained in one paper bag. This is accomplished by initially having a shorter bag in the bowl containing the paper covered treats.
- The paper bag is now moved out of the treat bowl and is hung to side of cage beside the treat bowl.

5. COMPLETE FORAGING:

The final step is to transition to have all food found by foraging. The transition to this stage should not be rushed. Your bird should again be checked by your veterinarian to make sure there are no concerns like muscle wasting or excessive weight loss.

Finally, full-out foraging is accomplished by having these paper bags filled with these paper-covered treats, as well as regular food, hung in various places in the cage.

6. BE PATIENT, THIS IS NEW:

By re-watching the DVD 'Captive Foraging' by Dr. Scott Echols you will learn new points and you will be reminded that this is the kindest thing to do for your pet's emotional and mental stability. Again, the majority of parrots have the mental capability of a 3-5 year old human child, yet only the emotional stability of a 2 year old human child. This means your parrot's attention span is relatively short.

Rest is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, and by using a separate Night and Day cage we maximize the mental health of our parrot pets.

Remember to be patient; most of this is new to you and your parrot. It could take several months for full acceptance , but the goal is a happy, healthy bird practicing more natural behaviors.