

P·E·T Pages

PsittaScene's PET Pages help you provide the very best for your bird by focusing on Parrot behaviour, Enrichment and Training.



This issue's contributors: David Woolcock is the Curator at Paradise Park, and a professional member of IAATE (The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators) and Louise Pellow is a Keeper at Paradise Park.

Enriching lives: One parrot at a time

By David Woolcock

It is said that "Variety is the spice of life." How true that is! We all relish the variety in our lives do we not? So why do so many pet parrot owners seem to think that a cage with a perch, a bowl of food and a bowl of water is sufficient to keep a parrot amused and contented? I do not know the answer, but I do know that enrichment can make a huge difference to their pet's quality of life.

There are many excellent parrot toys on the market from a plethora of companies. The one thing that most of them have in common is that they are usually pretty expensive. They not only cost you a small fortune but the prices also cause you to skimp on your pet. You can't provide what you'd like to give as often as you'd like to give it.

For many years here at Paradise Park we have been developing and trying all manner of enrichment ideas for our birds. Louise Pellow, one of our senior keepers, has championed the cause of parrot enrichment over the years. She never fails when it comes to simple, effective, inexpensive and enjoyable enrichment ideas.

But what exactly is it that we are trying to achieve through enrichment?

ENRICHMENT CAN reduce the occurrence of abnormal behaviours that a pet bird displays. For example, feather plucking can often be lessened

or even eliminated through the use of enrichment devices.

ENRICHMENT CAN increase the range of natural or wild behaviours that your bird demonstrates. The most obvious example of this is foraging. Instead of feeding once a day with a bowl full of food, you can present food in a way in which your pet has to "work" to find it - just as it would in the wild.

ENRICHMENT CAN help your bird to use the environment in which it lives in a more positive way. A large cage or aviary is great - if the bird uses the space. You might give it a reason to use the floor by providing a dust bathing area. Provide plenty of perches, ropes etc. to encourage the bird to use more of its enclosure. Give it secluded areas to take refuge if it should feel the need. Just because your bird only uses parts of its environment on the odd occasion, don't think those areas are less important than frequently used areas. The best analogy is that of your own house - no doubt you have a living area, an eating area, a bedroom, a kitchen and a bathroom at the very least. Although the majority of your time is spent in the living area and the bedroom you would find it difficult to function if somebody removed your bathroom or your kitchen simply because you spent less time there!



Cardboard tube rattle.



Egg box surprise.



Having a variety of simple enrichment ideas on hand helps you vary your offerings and keep things interesting.

ENRICHMENT CAN also increase your pet's ability to deal with challenging situations and the everyday stresses of life in a more normal way. The broader the range of experiences and situations your pet is exposed to, the less likely it is that he or she will find novel situations frightening or distressing.

Is enrichment just toys and food treats? Most certainly not. Enrichment can be divided into five categories:

Social enrichment is direct contact with people - you, your family and friends - as well as interaction with other birds and pets in your home. Telling your dog to sit or saying goodbye with a kiss are typical responses to a social environment. Another form of social enrichment is non-contact. Leaving the radio on whilst you are out or playing a bird DVD such as PollyVision provides auditory or visual stimulation.

Occupational enrichment involves exercising the mind or the body. Try to stimulate your bird's mind by giving it challenges to overcome. Hide its food in the environment or present it so that decisions must be made. Exercise the body by providing more room to fly or more areas to explore and climb around.

Physical enrichment is related to the complexity and size of the enclosure or environment in which your bird lives, in addition to the elements contained therein. Physical enrichment also includes elements on the outside of your pet's cage, such as a toy or treat on the roof that can only be accessed by hanging upside down from the top of the cage.

Sensory enrichment stimulates the senses - be it auditory, visual, olfactory, tactile or taste. The sound of rain (or the vacuum!) often triggers a bathing response in birds. The sight of a bird of prey silhouette might elicit an alarm response. The texture of a rag toy may encourage your bird to preen the toy as it might preen a partner in the wild.

Nutritional enrichment includes not only the type of food offered but also the way it is delivered or presented. Try hiding a treat in a clean egg carton. Destroying the carton to get to the treat is a little like stripping away pieces of bark to reach a tasty morsel. Instead of feeding once a day, feed several times in small amounts, maybe even in different places around the house if your bird has safe free access.

Choices, choices

To decide what forms of enrichment to give to your bird, first research your pet's species in the wild. Use books, magazines, the internet (parrots.org), wildlife programmes, zoo keepers and other parrot owners. Perhaps you might even be lucky enough to go see your species in the wild for yourself!

Ask yourself about the basic conditions birds like yours live in and how they are adapted for survival. What type of habitat do they live in? What do they feed upon? How do they spend their time? Are they adapted for a particular food source or way of life? How much time do they spend on the ground? Answers to questions such as these may give you some enrichment ideas more suited to your pet's species.

Don't be afraid to experiment and don't be tempted to discard an idea because "my bird won't do that." You may be surprised. It is also very easy to slip into the trap of giving the same enrichment time and time again because "he really likes that." The same enrichment day after day becomes routine. Why not write enrichment



Blue-throated Macaw taking the 'Pine Cone Challenge'.

Somebody once said,
*"The cure for boredom is curiosity.
 There is no cure for curiosity."*

Have you ever met a parrot that is not curious?



Large chewable swing.



Stuffed walnut shells.

ideas onto cards and then randomly select a card every day. This technique will help you vary your enrichment and not get stuck giving only what is most popular with the bird or easy for you.

Safety first!

Many people are apprehensive about toys because they are unsure what items are safe to use and what are not. We always recommend that if you are in doubt, don't use it. Always err on the side of caution. However, there is a huge variety of safe everyday enrichment ideas. When we run enrichment sessions during our parrot workshops, Louise spends at least two hours demonstrating the items that we use on a regular basis. These sessions have proven extremely popular and we have begun to upload some of the ideas onto the web in the form of worksheets. This format allows us to add new ideas on a regular basis. It also allows us to add video clips of some of our birds using the ideas described. To visit our enrichment website simply go to: www.parrottraining.org.uk and choose the enrichment tab.

SAFE, EVERYDAY ENRICHMENT ITEMS

- Cardboard toilet roll tubes (no adhesive residue please)
- Cardboard egg cartons
- Rawhide chews
- Large buttons (for smaller birds)
- Dried pasta shapes
- Various coloured napkins
- Old fashioned wooden clothes pegs (one piece - no metal spring!)
- Wooden craft sticks
- Wooden spoons/spatulas
- Whole cuttlebone
- Natural fibre rope
- Branches such as apple, willow, sycamore, beech, oak, pear
- Plants such as nasturtiums, buddleia, fuchsia
- Baby/toddler-safe toys such as teething rings, rattles and baby safe wooden blocks.

The list of food treats is even more extensive. Why not experiment with food colourings, natural flavourings, pasta and rice mixes, various pulses, steamed or boiled vegetables, sprouted seeds and pulses?

This is just the beginning - there are plenty more things to try. Be creative and have fun. Both your life and that of your pet will be enriched.

