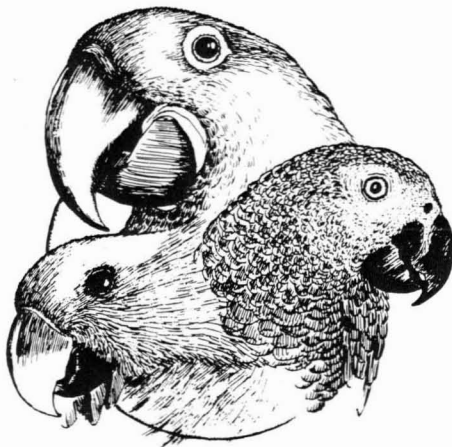


Parrot Behavior and Toys

by Bonnie Duncan, Seattle, WA



[Editor's Note: We welcome Bonnie Duncan, an avian behaviorist, as a columnist in the *Watchbird Journal*. Duncan's long-term attraction to parrots came in full bloom 10 years ago when she was given two baby Cockatiels to handfeed. At the present time she has six parrots—two Blue and Gold Macaws, a Congo African Grey, a Solomon Island Eclectus and two Cockatiels.

Duncan is vice president of the Northwest Exotic Bird Society; a member of the American Federation of Aviculture (AFA); a volunteer bird consultant at the Woodland Park Zoo; a volunteer for the Pacific Rim Wildlife Art Show and a speaker at national and local area bird clubs. We know her best from her presentation and presence at the 1996 AFA national convention in Concord, California. Those meeting Bonnie Duncan at this convention can well remember her enthusiasm and insightfulness in both pet and breeder bird behavior.

As a pet-parrot behaviorist during the past five years, Duncan has combined her understanding, love and knowledge of parrots with her training as an information-systems analyst to evaluate and resolve several hundred baby-parrot situations that included biting, screaming, fearfulness, feather-plucking and more. She was able to happily reconcile these birds with their frantic owners through teaching, demonstrating and encouraging both the birds and their owners—all in their own homes and aviary environments.

Duncan's goal as a behaviorist is simple—to have parrots and their owners learn to enjoy each other. She believes that humans can learn a lot from parrots about kindness, trust and having delight in life. Indeed, Duncan,

herself, truly delights in life and one can read this in her writings. Duncan is very unique in the behaviorist field and we are happy that she can share her insights with our readers. DRT]

Parrots are agile, intelligent, curious and active. We enjoy watching our parrots have so much fun.

African Grey, O'Henry, has high energy several hours a day. He plays vigorously, swinging toy to toy. He jabs, thrusts and parries in "pretend" fighting with some of his toys. He investigates acrylic and nylon jangling toys. In the process of moving around, swinging, climbing, flapping and hanging upside down, he tones his muscles and releases energy. Displacing his natural behaviors of chewing on trees, he chews on wood 2x2s, organic produce, hanging greens, wood toys. He enjoys food toys. He has a music box toy. He talks to his toys about himself. "O'Henry, up please. Hold on. You're just fine boy. You are so pretty." He tells the Eclectus, "You are such a good boy, Plato."

Eclectus, Plato, plays with medium energy several hours a day. He likes colors, shapes and textures and investigates parts of toys in detail. Plato interacts with complex wood and

leather toys in clusters and hanging from acrylic disks. He chews soft wood 2x2s, leather knots toys and small acrylic bobbing toys with moving segments. He hangs on and slowly rotates the high-impact nylon toys he swings upon. He plays with organic produce and enjoys bathing. Plato lives with O'Henry and two macaws. He often says, "I appreciate it," and learns many words from O'Henry.

Blue and Gold Macaw, Tukay, plays with toys in clusters. He has clusters of five acrylic toys, three wooden toys, high impact nylon toys, wood 2x4s, leather knots toys. He says "mmm" when he eats his organic produce, greens and in-shell pieces of coconut. He enjoys whole greens and large pieces of produce as well as chopped veggies. Tukay weaves himself among his acrylic toys and sometimes naps with them. He has a large steel bell, an acrylic swing, and a four foot play shelf along the back of his cage. He enjoys the play shelf, putting smaller toys on it, such as paper towel rolls and red lava rocks for beak grooming. Tukay has a large water dish and gives himself a mini-bath frequently. Toys help Tukay develop his curiosity, his agility and his relaxed



Photo by Bonnie Duncan

This Rose-breasted Cockatoo loves his toy teddy bear.

fun. (Tukay was fearful and abused in his past.) He displaces aggression onto a soft folded blanket that he grabs and bites until he releases the urges. He laughs, chortles, and has a few words. He plays with whole greens and has gorgeous plumage.

Rotating Toys

Having a wide variety of toys and rotating them in and out of the bird's cage stimulates most parrots who investigate them, chew and play actively. There is a practical aspect to creating, maintaining and replacing toys on a routine schedule. Over time, we seem to accumulate parts of toys we can modify to make new toys.

Breeding Parrots and Toys

In my view, some breeding parrots do play with toys in three situations:

- When their babies are feathered in the nest and able to keep warm and have several hours between feedings, I see the parents play with toys in the afternoons.

- During non-breeding season.
- After parent raised babies fledge, the parent birds show the toys to the

babies. I've seen the babies join their parents as if "we're all going to play with this toy together." They played in a "heap" with their parents. As if "there must be plenty here for all of us. So here we are." They did not wait for "their turn."

In breeder cages, toys provide something of interest. Something other than just the food, the perches, the nest box and the other parrot. After eating, one parrot may play with the toys. It provides exercise for their feet and beak as they move around and chew on it.

Even wild caught parrots will play with toys². While some may ignore toys (or even flowers on branches), another parrot will investigate it, play and talk to it. Maybe one thing will appeal to one parrot, something else to another bird.

Lonesome parrots will play and talk to toys. When their mate is in the box, they go play and hang on the toy and talk to it.

There are some owners of breeding parrots who do not have toys for their birds. Why is this? Three views come to mind:

- Some people may believe that toys will lessen the bird's interest and keep them from breeding.

- Some people may believe in their breeding set up, if a bird gets tangled up in a toy, they are not likely to know quickly.

- Some people may give up on maintaining and replacing the toys in the cages, although this is mentioned less often. Owners who provide toys for their breeding parrots say the toys benefit the birds and do not seem to lessen their breeding².

Many owners of breeding birds have fresh branches and organic produce for their parrots. Some people grow nut and fruit trees among their breeding aviaries. This takes several years but is worth the effort.

Starting with large food toys, such as whole greens, whole turnips for macaws and hunks for medium parrots is a way to introduce "toys" to your parrots. Branches, 2x4s, 2x2s are readily available. For durable toys, some well-designed high impact nylon toys have a year's replacement guarantee if they are used by parrots they were designed for. An acrylic swing ring with disks on it in a seven inch size is good for medium parrots and most macaws (Green-winged, Hyacinth, and Buffon's macaws probably need stainless steel swings, custom made).

Introducing Toys

People who may have a fearful parrot can follow these few steps to help your parrot accept toys:

- Lay the toys flat on a nearby table for a few days so the parrot can see them.

- Play with the toys yourself *slowly*.
- Play with your parrot and the toy in a room away from its cage.

- When the parrot shows interest in the toy, hang it on the outside of its cage for a couple of days then move the toy inside the cage.

- For some parrots, it is more comfortable to remove the parrot while attaching the toys to the inside of the cage or play-gym.

- Light-hearted comments and some silliness from the owner adds a positive touch to the parrot's introduction to the toys.

Toys that Flopped

Some owners have imaginations in full bloom. They use toys that are appropriate to the various sizes of their parrots. They call around to see what toys do well for their species of parrots. They replace chewed up branches and wooden toys.

Some owners have an off-switch regarding toys. They may think, "one toy flopped several years ago so now my parrots get none." Or they misunderstood their parrot's need to chew wood, and when one toy was chewed, they did not replace it. Or they gave up finding toys for their large parrots because when they looked years ago there were not any available.

Well, today we have dozens of toys for parrots including some for the largest macaws. It is certainly possible to find three or more toys even for the very large birds. People are currently custom making toys for Hyacinth, Green-winged and Buffon's Macaws.

Toy Safety

Toy safety is based on at least six things:

- The toy is safely designed with materials and attachments suited to the parrot who has the toy.
- The owner has a practice of observing the parrot with each new toy for a period of time. These observations are significant so the owner sees what the parrot does with the toy.
- The owner looks closely at each parrot and toy at least twice daily, removing worn toys.
- The bird's toenails are filed smooth or kept trimmed suitably for its toys. For example, some people use rope toys only outside the cage and with careful trimming and supervision. A second example is that baby birds need their sharp toenails for balance, so their toys need to be carefully selected so they don't catch on their feet.
- Chewing toys and dropping the chewed pieces is not the same as ingesting foreign substances.
- Today some toy manufacturers label what size parrots have tested the toy for safety. Some do not, so the owner must do the safety inspecting. Each toy must be appropriate for the parrot's beak size and toenails so it can

be played with safely.

Baby Parrots and Toys

Some breeders put soft, clean stuffed animals in brooders with single-clutch babies and occasionally with clutch-mates together in a brooder. The babies snuggle into and lean on the stuffed animal toys⁴.

During the many weeks of hand-feeding and training young birds to eat on their own, some macaw owners,

put small acrylic toys in the babies' cages so they play with toys as well as with their food and each other⁵.

Young birds will "pretend" fight with a toy. Young birds thrust and parry, back and forth, pushing and pulling the toy. Toys help provide development for young birds.

Baby birds enjoy toys sized to them and with safe parts. Balance is so important with baby birds. They need safe footing. When they are steady,



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baby birds investigate crafted toys and food toys, of course.

Multi-branch Play-gyms and Large Play Surfaces

Today we have branches, mini-trees and large wood or steel play surfaces for our parrots. Some people have toys, swings, food and water dishes on these play areas. In spite of the effort in hauling branches, some parrot owners use fresh branches and replace them when the leaves and bark are chewed off and the branches are chewed and shredded.

Plants and Parrots

Some people have planted aviaries that are delightful. Two plants that reseed themselves (or otherwise grow constantly) are bamboo and nasturtiums. These can be planted within inches of the aviary and grow inside as well as outside the wire. Once planted and doing well, they give the parrots privacy. The plants are also there for the parrots to chew on if they want to. Some parrots may like the plants growing in their cage and refrain from destroying them⁶. Some let the plants grow up around their nest boxes while others keep the foliage nicely pruned. Other parrots will chew every green twig as far as they can reach. Some parrots (caiques, for instance) nip off the buds and play up and down the bamboo stalks.

In the Pacific Northwest, the high



Photo by Bonnie Duncan

This Blue and Gold Macaw has a number of toys hanging from the cage top.

amount of rainfall causes the bamboo to become thicker and thicker all the time, often requiring pruning after the breeding season to admit more light.

At least one aviary I'm aware of has a large weanling flight containing decks and trees. The tree trunks are covered with sheet metal to protect them while the young macaws play on the decking in the shade of the trees.

If a planted flight is large enough, a parrot can be turned loose in it for a few minutes each day where it will enjoy the foliage. Clearly, climate, local rainfall, and the types of plants used play a major role in how fast the foliage grows.

A few people have waterfalls that are beautiful. Some parrots (African Greys for sure) seem to be attracted to the sound of running water.


Planting nut and fruit trees among the aviaries provides food for the parrots and the birds love living among the trees.

Planting organic produce provides fresh daily greens and vegetables.

Summary

Parrot toys are playing an increasing role in our parrots' living with us. Home-made wooden toys and organic food toys are plentiful. Commercially made toys, both chewable and durable, are becoming more available yearly. Custom toys are being made selectively for the largest macaws. As parrot owners our imaginations are expanding. We are learning ways to maintain and replace parrot toys. Toys may be added in moderation to even the most exciting habitats we provide our parrots.

Footnotes

1. In conversations, Joanne Abramson and Laney Rickman.
2. In conversation, Laurella Desborough.
3. Ibid.
4. In conversation, Dale Thompson.
5. Jeri Wright, Wright's Roost.
6. In conversation, Smiles Germeau. 

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