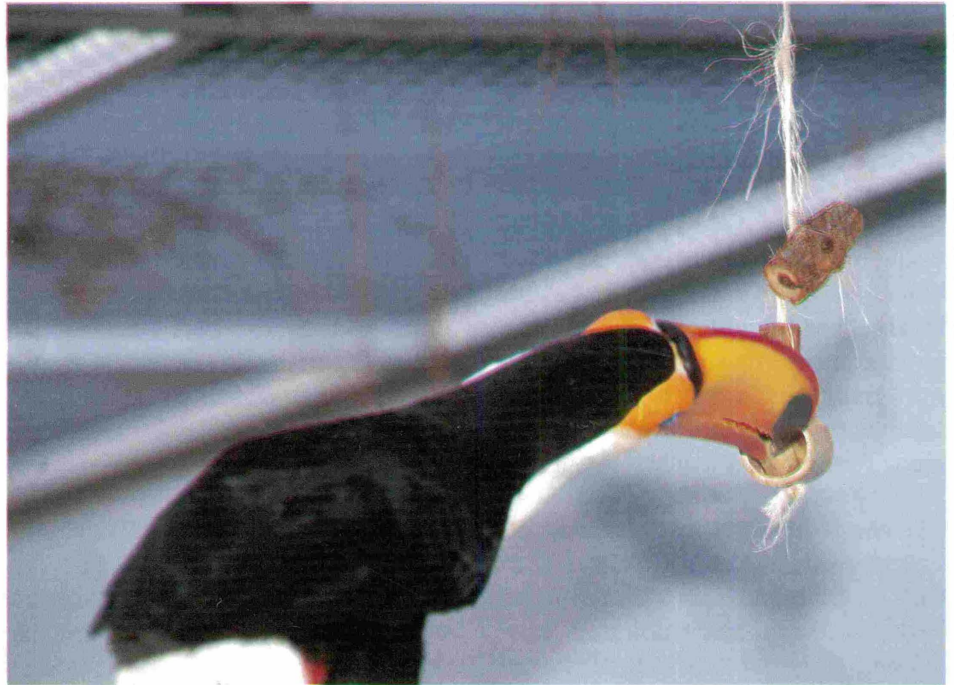


Enrichment

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Imagine yourself as a captive bird, living in the same enclosure day in and day out. You have the same perch you flew to when you first fledged, the same stainless steel food pan you first ate from when you were weaned. Not a lot changes for a captive bird. This is why providing enrichment for our birds is essential.

Enrichment is not a new concept for birds. There are four different types of enrichment: natural, artificial, food-based, and social. Natural enrichment includes plants growing in the aviary, and nesting material like leaves, grasses, and small twigs. In outdoor aviaries natural enrichment even includes the sun, rain, and fresh air. Artificial enrichment involves things that we create for



Photos by Martin Vince, Asst. Curator of Birds

Toco Toucans naturally exhibit a great deal of curiosity. A PVC tube holds this Toco's attention. It's especially attractive when a favorite food is stuffed into it.



Artificial enrichment—a 2 liter plastic soda bottle entertains and challenges our Toco Toucans as they figure out how to extract food treats.

the birds like wooden toys and soda bottles. Food enrichment is as simple as providing various foods that the birds enjoy eating. The fourth type of enrichment is social and that can include interactions with other birds or in the case of a single bird, interactions with the keepers.

Here at Riverbanks, we have recently been focusing on various enrichment items for our off-exhibit Toco Toucans, Keel-billed Toucans, and Rhinoceros Hornbills. Since these aviaries are off-exhibit, we are free to use almost any suitable item we wish, whereas for the on-exhibit aviaries we are careful to furnish only naturalistic enrichment items. The appearance of our enrichment inventions off-exhibit is not important; the toys need only be safe, sturdy, and functional. We have found creative uses for ropes, bamboo pieces, plastic soda bottles,

and other everyday items that are cheap and readily available.

The first artificial off-exhibit "toy" we made was from a plastic, 2-liter soda bottle. We made a hole in the lid, threaded a piece of durable string through it and tied a knot at the end. Afterwards, we poured some colorful, Zoopreem parrot pellets inside the bottle. This first experimental toy was placed inside one of our Toco Toucan aviaries.

At first it seemed as though the toucans were frightened by the bottle hanging from the ceiling. They made loud grunting noises and hopped frantically around never getting too close to the toy. The next morning we came into the bird center to find that the toy had scratches in a few places we had not previously noticed. Apparently when no one was looking our curious Toco Toucans had attacked the bottle. Our toy was a success.

Another bottle that worked exceptionally well for the Toco Toucans had large holes cut in the sides and contained a few shiny keys dangling from the top. This toy proved to be very stimulating for the birds as they tried to reach the keys with their long bills. In fact, they used the same skills employed in the wild to reach out and pluck a berry from a thin branch. Their first attempts were awkward but as they played more, their skill level increased.

We decided to create more toys for some of the other birds inside the bird center. We made each toy appropriate in size and style for each aviary. For our Keel-billed Toucans we used lightweight ingredients in 20 oz. bottles so as not to intimidate these easily frightened birds. At the other end of the spectrum, we used large soda bottles full of pebbles and colored water for our pair of Rhinoceros Hornbills. These bottles made loud hollow sounds that could be heard very well throughout the building.

Sometimes when we opened the bird center in the mornings, we would find our toys smashed up and torn from the ceiling. We took these opportunities to replace the toys with new

and exciting ones, thereby maintaining the birds' interest. Enrichment devices quickly become boring for the birds, and are only as good as the frequency with which they are changed: they should be replaced every few days.

We are very fortunate, in South Carolina, to live in a climate suitable for keeping many of our birds outdoors, on exhibit, year round. Riverbanks has a total of 14 new outdoor aviaries which are planted with trees, bushes and grass. This is "natural enrichment" at its best, providing the ideal avian environment, and a setting in which guests can see birds live and behaving as they would in the wild. In these enclosures, the birds are exposed to fresh air, sun and rain, while also getting a first hand look at the changing seasons.

Providing enrichment that is naturalistic in form and still functional, proves to be more challenging outside in the Bird Garden. Each aviary has two to three large, live, planted bushes to create a more natural place to hide. There are also thick vines and tree branches used for perches. The use of long, hanging vines gives the appearance of a jungle, and the birds prefer the safety of such perches that are high above the heads of our guests.

For chewing material in these exhibits we are challenged to use only natural substances. The cockatoos and other parrots enjoy sweetgum branches and bamboo stalks that are available on site. Recently we have used conifer branches for our Thick-billed Parrots and Hyacinth Macaws. Conifers act as great cover and chewing material. Because they remain green for weeks after cutting, we also use them to provide seclusion for the softbills in our off-exhibit breeding aviaries.

Enrichment is an important part of daily life for our birds. Combining proper foods, clean water, enrichment, and shelter ensures that our birds receive an excellent quality of life. Such enriched environments help the birds remain emotionally and physically healthy. It is up to us as bird keepers to make enrichment part of our daily routine for the health and well-being of the birds in our care. 