

A Look at Chewing in Parrot Behavior

by Ed Cravens
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Psittacine beaks were designed for chewing. It is one of the things parrots do best. Whether it is shredding newspaper or extracting food from a pea pod or walnut, our pet birds (and breeders) will spend hours each day utilizing their strong beaks.

Not only does this activity keep beaks and nails healthy, but it helps maintain alertness and mental stability in captive and caged parrots.

Accordingly it is our responsibility as conscientious aviculturists to provide for our psittacines' chewing needs.

The primary use of a parrot's chewing habits is in the search for food. From soft buds to crunchies, tropical fruits and flowers, parrots love to eat. A tongue in constant motion delights to the different textures, shapes and tastes. A bird with a varied, interesting food assortment will often spend longer at the feeding dish chewing, exploring and ingesting its nourishment. The need for such interested active behavior by our psittacines is perhaps enough to warrant recommendations against feeding a 100% anything diet. Birds fed the same food day in and day out may become bored with their food dish offerings. Boredom can be a serious detriment to healthy, happy pet and breeder parrots.

Duplicating wild bird foodstuffs such as small seeds, grasses, leaves, soil trays, buds and bugs can do wonders for a psittacine's nutrition and what I call "wild savvy." My best breeders are those with the most active "wild savvy."

Most captive psittacines have a limited range of foodstuff knowledge. Only by training and exposure can we teach our conures to dissect a whole papaya; our Amazons to eat the worm inside a homegrown apple

or our cockatoos to chew an unpeeled banana to get at the sweet meat. Some of the interesting (and free) foods we have successfully introduced to our parrot flock are acorns, Pinon nuts, wild green guavas, juniper berries, daisies, clover pods and Russian olive boughs. Pay attention to what the wild birds in your area are eating and offer similar harvest to your pets and breeders. Don't be afraid to make your psittacines work for their food, it will pay off in "wild savvy." I have a Black Lory pet who would never touch fresh peach until I put him out in the peach tree with the Hawk-headed Parrots who demolish peaches. For dinner that night the Black Lory ate nothing but peaches!

A second instinctual chewing behavior common among psittacines involves the nesting season. Many a parrot owner has scars on household woodwork attesting to the sudden appearance of destructive chewing during their parrot's nesting period. This mating time of the year, it is essential we provide our psittacines with branches, bark and chlorophyll greenery to satisfy their needs. In many cases, introduction of chewing material can directly stimulate nesting, mating and laying in breeding pairs. Noted aviculturist Dale Thompson has, for years, sought out tender eucalyptus branches to stimulate his Galahs to nest. Dr. Klaus Peters of Vilshbiburg, Germany notes that the introduction of rotted log material into his flight of Hooded Parakeets promptly set the unproven pair to burrowing and chewing and taking to their nestbox.

We believe in covering and constricting the hole to our psittacines' nestbox prior to the spring breeding season — thus forcing the parrots to work diligently to enter their laying

site. Such chewing behavior seems to leave the birds less frantic and more exhausted at the end of the day, lessening the likelihood of one breeder bird picking on its mate due to peak energy and hormone levels unchanneled by natural activity.

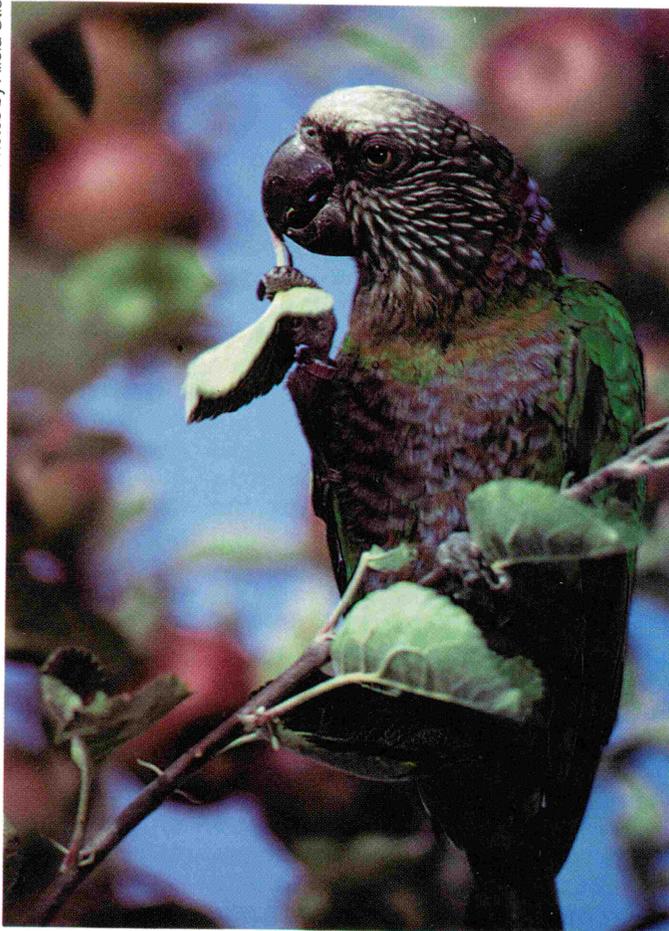
For the same reasons, we discourage the use of plastic, metal and screen covered nestboxes for parrot species. Many pairs in the wild will spend weeks excavating a nest site, chewing from dawn to dusk long after the cavity is large enough. To provide captive breeders with nest sites of unchewable materials is both inhumane and unclever. Quelling any instinctual behavior in a captive psittacine for hygiene or convenience reasons only invites abnormal consequences. Most common of these consequences is self mutilation or feather picking. Thousands of high strung or frustrated psittacines across the U.S. are immersed in this abnormal behavior. In some cases, treatment is merely to place a collar upon the parrot and restrict his chewing urges even further — a crude solution at best.

Feather plucking pets and breeders have a missing link in their environment. The most common missing link I have found is excess chewing and preening energy with no channel of healthy outlet. Instead of preventive collaring or bitter topical sprays, a total program to re-channel this excess energy should include:

1. Immediate changes in the parrot's cage environment to stimulate mental response and interest. These may include - light, space, location,

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A Hawk-headed Parrot enjoys pruning the landscape. After satiating their hunger, wild parrots will often spend many hours chewing, biting off, tonguing, nibbling upon and playing with bits of nearby greenery. It is this pastime that often puts them at odds with farmers.



Baby psittacines, as with these two Cape Parrots, when brought up in environments of greenery, learn to masticate leaves, stems, flowers, seed pods and even soil. They can obtain nutritious or enzymatic fluids from such materials.

be confronted immediately upon its appearance so it does not become habitual!

The finest of American breeders are beginning to recognize the subtleties of breeding parrots when they use hollowed out logs or heavy, thick (2 x 10 inch) lumber nest boxes because of the silence and dense security they offer mated pairs. Hardwood chewable chips were suggested by northern California breeder Fred Bauer as a desirable alternative to sawdust shavings as nest material. He noted that some pairs turned these chips into dust by the end of the season anyway!!!

A final area of chewing behavior in our psittacines involves daily activity, play, normal aggressions and destructive tendencies in the offseason. Wild parrots spend hours dissecting natural materials in their native habitat. In captivity, we offer our birds branches with green leaves and bark, wood, clay, leather, rocks, potted grasses, cut flowers and buds, and toys to keep their life interesting and their exercise level high. Beaks, feet, tongues, toenails and wings all benefit from chewing behaviors involving natural materials. We regularly bathe our psittacines by providing them with wetted leafy boughs or grass flats. Parrots love to flop and roll, itch and soak themselves in dewy lawns or rain-drenched trees.

Moreover, as our parrots all have access to thick, barky perches (no PVC or iron-hard woods to frustrate young chewers), logs and rock boulders, we have never in eleven years had to clip one toenail or beak on one of our birds. The natural way is to allow psittacines to groom themselves through healthy daily activity.

As a final consideration for those considering a pet or breeding pair of parrots, I would group the parrots within my realm of experience into three chewing groups (relative to their size of course!):

Voracious — includes cockatoos, macaws, Aratinga conures, large Psittacula, greatbills, lovebirds and the Quaker Parrot.

Sporadic and seasonal — includes certain Amazons, Poicephalus, African grays, cockatiels, budgies and Pyrrhura conures.

Least destructive — includes Australian parakeets, lorries, caiques, kings, Brotogeris and Eclectus.

This is a somewhat arbitrary listing and many exceptions will, of course, be noted. ●

new food dishes, greenery, toys and perch choices.

2. Equivalent changes in foods offered, to make eating a longer, more challenging and interesting activity.

3. Daily spray baths to encourage preening and feather growth for warmth. Utilize care where cold tem-

peratures are involved.

4. Introduction of a nesting box or hollow log.

5. Increase the amount of handling in the case of pet birds. Full body massage of pet birds.

6. Serious consideration of a companion or mate for single parrots.

Remember, feather picking should

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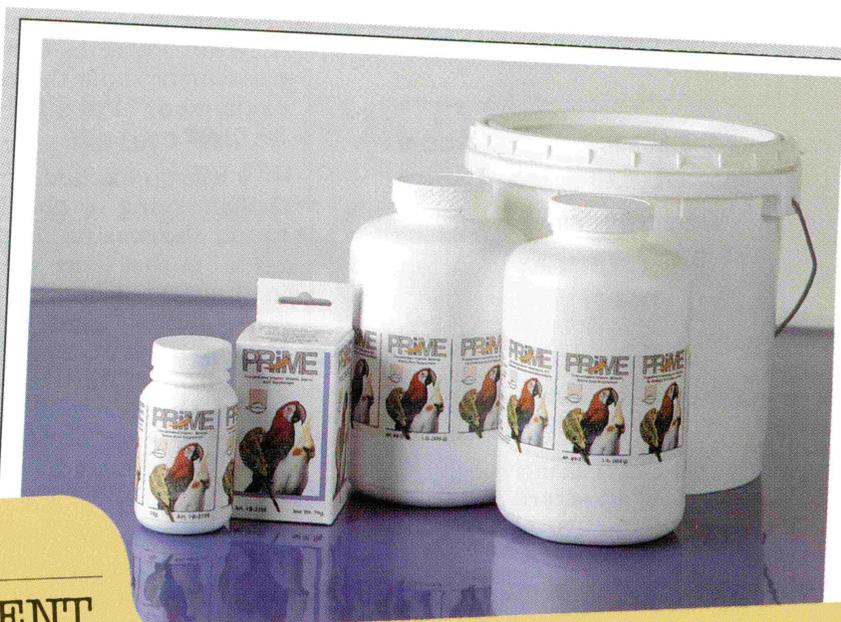
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