

# Not doing enough for your parrot? Get creative!

By KAREN WINDSOR, Foster Parrots

Our position on parrots as pets has been well established nationally. While we will continue to advocate for parrots as wild animals, the fact is that millions of parrots live in people's homes and many millions more will be born into captivity in the years to come. A large percentage of captive birds live discontented lives in uninspired environments that often result in incompatibility issues between parrots and their people. If we are going to keep birds, it is important that we put the effort into keeping them well, and learn to provide sustainable and creative quality care that will result in harmonious relationships and parrots that are as well adjusted and as happy as possible in their captive situation.

Because I work in rescue and field dozens of calls each week from people wanting to surrender their birds, I am continually reminded that these wild animals, sooner or later and in general, tend not to succeed as captive creatures. The top two reasons why parrots are surrendered to rescues are

- 1 guilt on behalf of the humans forced to confine these highly social and intelligent flighted creatures, and
- 2 aggression on the part of confined and frustrated parrots.

If a person's decision to buy or adopt a parrot were based on the quality of the environment they were realistically able or willing to provide, there would be far fewer guilty people walking around in need of unloading irate parrots. And if parrot guardians were to channel their guilt productively and creatively, they might make the improvements necessary to help them keep their birds.

## Territoriality and the creative cage environment

Even if one buys the biggest macaw-sized cage on the market it is still an inadequate environment for an animal born to inherit the skies. But can birds like their cages? Of course they can. Territorial by nature, birds take possession of their cages. But where some cages are homes, havens and safety zones, others are prisons. Sometimes an open door is all it takes to make the difference. We need to be creative in order to provide environments that are stimulating, engaging and natural in their appeal to the wild animals we live with.

In order to protect them (and sometimes others) from harm, most captive parrots are confined in one way or another and for varying periods of time. Consequently, cage or enclosure interiors are of paramount



Photo: Karen Windsor

*If you're not lucky enough to find a hollow log, try providing a cardboard box for your parrot to explore.*

importance. A variety of perches must be provided for climbing, roosting, and foot conditioning. Natural branches with both rough and smooth bark are ideal for interior landscaping. Cloth, sisal and hemp ropes can be enjoyed as perches, swings or simulated vines.

There should be plenty of wooden toys for chewing, but these need not be store bought. While the colours of retail toys are nice, the price tags can often be hefty for an item that will potentially be reduced to splinters in a matter of days - or even hours. Blocks of untreated pine can be drilled and strung on ropes in order to provide affordable chew toys.

One of the most intriguing diversions one can provide for their parrot is a cardboard box. Better yet - a box inside a box. This offers a bird the opportunity to engage in the innately compelling activity of excavating a nesting hole. If you are fortunate enough to come across a hollow log, this is the ultimate parrot accommodation item. Knotted balls of shoe-lace strings provide parrots with chew toys that are curiously like feather sheaths. Rolls of paper calculator tape are happily shredded and unravelled. Quaker parrots (*Myiopsitta manachus*) are industrious nest builders! Provide them with handfuls of twigs that can be woven through bars and grates. Cockatoos love puzzles. Let them dismantle toys made of nuts, bolts and screws. Contrary to the impression traditionally offered by the pet trade, parrots are not "easy-to-care-for" companions. They are arguably among the most difficult. Living with a parrot requires observational skills, a lively imagination and an overall extended investment of mental energy if you are to provide activities and distractions that will keep that parrot engaged.



*Goffin's Cockatoos enjoy their bird room outfitted with natural branches, chew toys, ropes and swings.*

Photo: Marc Johnson

At the Foster Parrots sanctuary where most of the parrots are free flighted, we witness birds trying to put themselves into cages all the time. Cages that have been vacated become coveted territory or intriguing domains to explore. As many times as we've witnessed happy birds putting themselves into cages, we've witnessed frustrated, hostile birds settle down and become significantly less aggressive when they've been freed from consistent confinement or, more importantly, when they've been given the freedom of choice.

Atticus is a Yellow-naped Amazon (*Amazona auropalliata*), approximately 15 years old, who has been a Foster Parrots resident for 5 years. A decidedly solitary bird, Atticus lived for a time in a large floor to ceiling cage. He wasn't an aggressive fellow by any means and really did not require caging. He simply liked his cage. His door was always open. However, when we took in a pair of wild and potentially dangerous Amazons that did require confinement, it became necessary to evict Atticus. He spent the next several weeks trying to figure out how to get back into the cage. We offered him a very attractive, mid-sized, dome-topped cage placed in a premium spot in front of the largest window, but he didn't want that cage. Finally we dragged a monstrosity of a cage out for Atticus. Eight feet high and nearly 5 feet deep and wide, it sits squarely in the middle of the floor. His door is always open and he comes and goes at will but mostly he sits contentedly triumphant in his giant cage.

On the other hand, consider JoJo, a Moluccan Cockatoo (*Cacatua molucensis*). Having been confiscated from drug lords, warehoused for several years, then passed through a couple of homes before landing at the Foster Parrots sanctuary, JoJo had become cage-bound. We placed his large cage in a prominent area where two Umbrella Cockatoos and another Moluccan lived freely, and where staff and volunteers passed by frequently or stopped to chat and play with birds. We never closed JoJo's door. People would stop and talk to him and reach in to pet him. He was able to observe the relationships between people and other birds from his safe place without feeling either isolated or threatened. He was provided with ample hanging toys to play with, chew on - or hide behind. He was always welcome to join the activity of the room, and in his own time he began to venture out - just a little, at first. He would stick a head out the door, then a head and a half a body. In time he could perch for longer and longer periods on top of his open door. He was liberally praised whenever he was interactive. Soon he began to swing upside down and to play. When he exercised his massive voice, he didn't seem to do it to solicit attention, but

for the joy of hearing himself. No one ever yelled at him for it. A year after his arrival JoJo would finally leave his cage altogether and march around comically or hop about like a bunny. Preferring women, he began to trust a few people and could be found snuggling in a lap every now and then. He also found comfort and community with his fellow cockatoos. Eventually JoJo would seek out the haven of his cage, but it was always his choice, and this power helped build his confidence. The key to drawing him out was to situate him in the most active room in the facility where interaction with people and other cockatoos would strengthen his social skills, yet he always had the option to retreat.

Most of us may lack the financial resources to construct elaborate outdoor aviaries. That should not impede us from creating indoor environments that can vastly improve a bird's quality of life. Start by finding a way to simply open the cage door. Spare rooms or neglected sun porches can be converted into dedicated bird space. Inexpensive wood-framed screened doors can be installed to keep bird rooms safe without completely cutting them off from the rest of the home. Even a corner of a busy family room can be transformed to fulfil a parrot's needs.

At Foster Parrots most birds live freely on "hanging frames" - natural wooden branches that are joined together in interesting configurations and suspended from the ceiling. Food and water cups and a wide array of toys are attached. Sometimes these frames are suspended directly above a bird's cage, providing a whole new

dimension to the living arrangement and an opportunity for the birds to climb and gain height. Sometimes the frames are hung to act as "cages without bars".

While we generally discourage wing-clipping, some people do find it necessary. Birds with clipped wings are unable to leave their frames, but enjoy a more natural arrangement of living up high on branches. Interestingly, many of our flighted parrots become possessive of their frames and tend to like to stay on them.

## Social behaviour and routine

It is the highly social nature of parrots that makes them attractive as companions. They are capable of transferring essential bonding behaviour to people, which, in a captive situation, is an arrangement preferable to social isolation. And although we love our parrots and hope to do everything in our power to make them happy, we are not birds. We are humans, our primary bonds are with other humans and our lives are full of responsibilities and diversions that constantly tear us away from our parrots.

Parrots are superior in their ability to adapt to our inadequacies as companions. Still, we have found that by establishing a dependable routine for our birds, we minimize the stress and confusion of a haphazard world. The result, very often, is a parrot that feels less compelled to assert control over us through excessive vocalization, and a parrot more at ease with its world.



A hanging play frame of natural branches with toys and dishes attached can be a coveted environment away from (or even in place of) a cage.

Photo: Karen Windsor



*A floor to ceiling enclosure built in an underused corner can be an inexpensive way to give your bird more freedom and enrichment.*

Get your parrot up and out of "bed" every morning at the same time. The breakfast ritual of preparing food, cleaning a cage and loving a parrot should be something your bird can depend on everyday.

Presumably, you must go off to work or run the errands of the day. Your parrot should know that next comes several hours of having to entertain himself within his confines. Playing a radio or keeping him in front of a large window where he can observe wild birds feeding and interacting can become an essential part of a parrot's day. When you come home from work, it's bird time. Take your bird out. Play with him and make a big deal over what a wonderful bird he is. He should be able to anticipate and count on this special one-on-one time every day.

Direct interaction time can be followed by several hours of having your bird out with you and the family, but not necessarily attached to your body. Have a play stand or hanging frame in the areas of the house where you spend greater periods of time or in rooms that tend to be central to overall family activity. A parrot needs to have a sense of involvement in the flock dynamics. At dinner time after the cooking has been completed, parrots can be welcomed into the kitchen and involved in the dinner ritual. Parrots are social eaters. They are apt to eat better and accept healthier foods when those are the foods being shared by the family flock. They take greater enjoyment in eating out of your hand than out of a lonely dish. When the day has drawn to an end, it should be "bed time for birds" at the same

time every night. Keeping in mind that parrots require 10 to 12 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night, we recommend that a parrot's sleep area be located away from the area of general family activity, in a room that can be made quiet, dark and peaceful. Your parrot's natural inclination is to tuck himself away to "roost" each evening, so a "sleeping cage" quickly establishes itself as an expected and desirable finish to a parrot's day.

Knowing precisely what to expect from us and knowing the behaviour that is expected of them gives a parrot just as much a feeling of control over it's life as its ability to decide whether it wants to be inside the cage or out. Old aviculture used to dictate asserting dominance and control over a parrot through wing clipping, consistent caging and keeping them perched at a height lower than one's head. But parrots are not dogs and they do not respond to subjugation. Their wild and instinctual nature must be acknowledged, accommodated and respected. Make a cage a compelling and engaging environment by providing boxes, chew toys, and rope vines. Then open the cage door. Let your bird out

Give him an aviary or bird-proof a room and let him fly. Install hanging frames made of natural branches way above your head and let him be up high. Feeling guilty because you're at work all day and your bird is home alone? Birds belong in flocks. Have more than one bird. Two or more birds are not twice as much work as one bird. They're half as much work.

We force our parrots to live in our world, and then we don't understand why they scream, beg, become aggressive, become phobic, feather pluck, self-mutilate... Sometimes it is necessary to force ourselves to live in their world before we can understand how to address the issues of parrot guardianship creatively and help ease their experience with us.

Knowing that, overall, people tend to fail as companions to parrots; we do not advocate parrots as pets. However, we are highly motivated to help people understand the needs of their birds and to improve the quality of care they are able to deliver. We want people to keep their birds. Here at the sanctuary we are short on space.



*Get creative! Give your parrot an inexpensive and entertaining treat by filling a paper tube with surprises and simply folding over the ends of the tube to close.*