

Natural Environmental Enhancement for Your Captive Birds

By EB Cravens

As a conscientious birdkeeper, the search for ways to provide the optimum natural environment for my captive psittacines is an ongoing endeavor. In nature are found so many of the elusive answers to questions about our birds' health, development, emotional contentment.

Indeed, not only parrots, caged birds of all sizes and sort respond positively to natural methods of aviculture. I have found over the years that the more nature I can bring into the world of my pet or breeder birds, the more true-to-life (therefore normal!) will be the daily behavior of my flock members and accordingly, their offspring.

Correct home habitat for avian species begins with fresh air and sunlight. I can never comprehend the thinking of the literally hundreds of psittacine owners I have known who, since they live in northern temperate environments with strong winter factors, use this as an excuse for keeping their birds indoors 365 days a year. I have spent months of cold weather in the western mountains of the U.S. Yet I always allowed my healthy amazons, conures, lorries, cockatiels, and more to be outside during the best portions of the best days. All it takes is a safe carry cage or a safe garden aviary and a healthy parrot that has been acclimatized to such a sojourn.

Birds kept indoors without natural sunlight can over many months suffer loss of sheen to their plumage no matter what kind of artificial full-spectrum lighting or expensive vitamin supplements are provided. Their molts will become lighter and less pronounced; hence appetites during molting season will remain much the same as the rest of the year.

Activity levels at sunrise and sunset may be artificially stifled in your birds. This is worsened if your feeding schedules make no attempt to mimic wild bird feeding times! I could go on and on with this. The point is, only a little imagination is necessary to correct the indoor/outdoor dilemma for all your captive birds. Screened—not glassed--porches, windows and skylights help solve the situation, as do sliding glass doors which can be opened even in winter when noontime hours warm the day above freezing temperature. Birds, especially mountain and cold clime species, are much more temperature hardy than many owners believe. My 12-year Red-lored Amazon used to love to go out in the garden tree and sing and laugh and snap at snowflakes during wintry afternoons. I would monitor him and go out every 10 minutes or so to see if he wanted to come in, but Jossaloha would growl at me and go on with his game, often picking up one foot and switching feet to warm the other for a while!

RAIN TEACHINGS

The past twenty years I have considered it significantly important to take all my fledgling baby birds out into a rain shower to train them that that noise on the roof above and wetness falling from the sky are one and the same. It's natural. It incites chicks to flutter

and instinctually bathe, taste the drops and not be afraid when a sudden shower strikes the rooftop of their bird room. When in the mountains I used to also take fledglings out into the snowstorm briefly. Imagine what it would be like for a captive hatched bird to see snow out the window year after year, but NEVER have any concept of what it actually was? Nature training I call it and there are dozens of educational ways to increase the range of your parrots knowledge. Do you live on the beach but have birds who are ignorant of what the ocean is? Get out a small carry cage and take them down and gently splash the water. They will carry the concept back to the house in their tiny, acute brain; just make sure the bird is young enough to not react in terror at the immense strangeness.

Since I began active avicultural writing in 1991, I have maintained a constant harangue about the critical necessity of greenery in the domestic bird's daily life. Nature to a parrot, canary, dove, pheasant or finch means green plants. They eat them, they perch upon them, they groom their beak and toenails upon them, they bathe in them, have sex and nest in them, hide in them and sleep within. So tell me, why do I still see so #*?+@! (oops, sorry about that) pet and breeder cages with dry old worn out perch furniture? Not enough time, I am informed. Or: I don't have access to greenery. Ah, such gentle birdie balderdash!

I have sought out and procured greenery in New York City when I was traveling with my pet parrots. Also in the Arizona desert, wintertime Colorado, and wherever I found myself camping. Get hip to safe greenery sources: the lists of non-toxics abound in publications and on the internet. There are myriads of safe plants out there for the asking, Wash 'em off. There you go...

Other greenery sources abound in seed packets for the planting in safe backyard or buckets of soil. More are available in nurseries which do not use toxic soil additives or fertilizers; and on grocery store shelves where green castaways not put into salads or soups can be enrichment for birds.

Flowers too, if not soaked in bloom preservatives or heavily fertilized, are loved by most parrots. During frigid months in the mountains, we grew in south facing windows geraniums, marigolds, nasturtiums, spider plants, herbs, cluster palms, ferns, evergreen and indoor trees that could be periodically pruned for offerings to our birds. Everyone realizes that psittacines brought up with greenery are anxious to chew and devour its freshness, but please do not forget that budgerigars and canaries and finches absolutely love to nibble safe leaves stems and flowers. Don't neglect the tiny avian species. One small note of caution. A lot of the reports on toxic plants have originated with sickness in small avian species. These birds have such diminutive constitutions and in some cases, lessened intelligence due to generations of captive breeding. The greatest danger arises when birds have been denied greenery for a long period of time and they become so frantic for it, that should they be given access to a plant unsafe when eaten in very large quantities, these birds consume too much and overdose.

Yes...greenstuffs. Providing them for my parrots and parakeets is **THE SINGLE MOST LABOR INTENSIVE** chore in my weekly aviary routine. I advise owners to keep this in

their mindset. Bringing nature to your birds in this way is hard work; so's the cleanup the week after. But there really is no choice, is there? At least not if you are looking for life enhancement for caged birds.

A further list of habitat factors that bring nature to our avian subjects would include exposure to moonrise and full moon cycles, hollow logs and clean dry rotted wood material, sandy soil minerals and grit (we offer a saucer every two to three weeks then take it out after 24 hours), hanging tree branches up next to a ceiling for experience of height, dry leaves, buds, wild nuts, bark, seeding grasses, rocks and stones, even a fountain or little falls of running water. Use your imagination; so many of nature's items may be brought inside to the pets instead of taking the pets out to the materials.

Even a birdfeeder in or outside a window will perk up your parrot and give him hours of watching enjoyment. Open a screened window and let the wild sounds drift in. Bird species are very audibly-oriented creatures. They are also flock social and being alone can be a real problem for some birds' psyche. I am especially opposed to the breeding facility mentality which insists upon isolating with boards or tin each parrot in the same genus for fear that seeing neighbors might distract a pair from egg laying. (To me this either indicates overcrowding or improperly bonded pairs, but that is another story!)

I like to think of environmental enhancement for my psittacines as a fine-tuning of their daily routines and surroundings. The more one observes closely and pays attention to detail, the more magically natural becomes the space in which the birds' lives unfold...

With aloha, EB