

A Toy to Climb All Over – Hanging and Gym Toys

by Desi Milpacher

One of the more entertaining yet necessary things for a companion parrot to do is to climb. Climbing is one thing that birds do well, besides flying. Scrambling around is involved in foraging, mating, escaping, playing – nearly everything a parrot does, every day, in the natural world. And so it makes sense to try and replicate the conditions for climbing, hanging and performing other acrobatic moves to engage, exercise and mentally stimulate (both pet and human, as it takes some creativity to think of all this) your companion bird. A simple rule to think of: if a person can entice a parrot (subtly exploiting its natural curiosity) with a favourite food or toy item, it may be willing to climb for it, increasing its exercise load. Simple or complex toys alike can achieve this, as we'll see in this text.

As is the way with all children's and pet's toys, safety for all is the first concern. With some climbing toys, the parrot is likely to be out of its cage.

Safety things to remember:

- Never leave a parrot out of its cage unattended
- Never have a parrot in the kitchen --> toxic fumes, burn injuries
- Check all *new* toys first for places to get legs, heads caught
- Never leave a parrot unattended where there's water
- Examine all toys (hanging and foot toys) frequently, to ensure rope is not fraying, loops appearing and parts breaking down – old toys in particular should be carefully inspected
- Place play station/perch out of the main traffic area of the room
- Watch out for ceiling fans, heat registers/radiators, furnace vents, open windows, open doors, fireplaces, and, in the bathroom, open sinks, tubs and toilets
- For safety use stainless steel quick links (screw-clasp type, *no* spring loaded clasps that can trap toes and beaks) to attach toy and browse items to ceilings and cage wire
- Keep an easily cleaned mat under where your bird is playing, for cleanliness and safety for the rest of your family

For mental and physical stimulation try these items:

- *Browse* (the cheapest climbing toy of all, make sure bird safe): give as is or with food and toy items hanging from it, hide things and food so they have to go searching. Use branches of grapevine (unsprayed), Saskatoon, willow, seagrass rope, natural raffia. Ensure they're thick enough to support a bird's weight; he'll be more likely to use them. For a more comprehensive list of what's safe plant-wise and what's not at **Planned Parrothood.com** <http://www.plannedparrothood.com/plants.html>
- *Leaf bathing with suspended leaves*: many species (eg: caiques) love to bathe by rubbing themselves on wet leaves, as they would do in the wild. Use leaves of chard, kale and other greens for this (they can then eat them afterward). Weave into wire of cage or into other browse so they can climb to get them. The same thing (sans bathing) can be done with strips of unbleached white or brown wrapping paper
- *Boings* (wire-enforced rope that can be shaped). Suspend from cage ceiling. See safety concerns above

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- *Swings* made from wreath material or rope and untreated wooden dowel. Suspend from cage ceiling, using stainless steel quick links
- *PVC gyms and perches*. Suspend toys and food items to stimulate interest. See safety concerns above
- *Ropes* (untreated). Suspend and create trails around the room
- *Get a Grip*™ or other bird-safe nets. Same as above
- *Ladders*: commercial hard plastic, or flexible ones made of rope. Use on play gym areas
- *Ramps*: made of hard plastic or wood. Same as above, or in enclosures
- *Hanging willow baskets*. Suspend from ceiling and fill with interesting items
- *Indoor play stands*: make out of natural wood or PVC pipe. Attach favourite toys in different positions so the bird can climb to each. Avoid messy food items with wood stands, as difficult to clean
- *Wooden clothes-drying rack*: a quick and easy parrot gym (unstained, unpainted). Equip with favourite toy items to encourage climbing from dowel to dowel
- *Build an outdoor aviary!* Hang favourite and familiar items, plants, swings, boings, ropes and all the rest, out in it

With a little bit of ingenuity (and common sense) a person can create a play area or areas for his/her parrot that will delight, entertain and engage. It is our responsibility as parrot caregivers to provide everything that a companion bird needs to be challenged – to be physically and mentally healthy – and to do it in a safe and interesting way that will benefit all involved.

Sources:

D'Arezzo, Carol and Shannon-Nunn, Lauren, **A Practical Parrot Guide: Parrot-Toys and Play Areas**, Springfield: Crowfire Publishing, Virginia, 2000.

The Parrot Enrichment Activity Book 2

http://www.parrots.org/pdfs/all_about_parrots/reference_library/PEAB2.pdf

Cravens, EB: Natural Environmental Enrichment for Captive Birds

http://www.parrots.org/pdfs/all_about_parrots/reference_library/health_and_nutrition/Natural%20Environmental%20Enhancement%20for%20Your%20Captive%20Birds.pdf

Parrot Enrichment.com

<http://www.parrotenrichment.com/>