

Creating a Foraging Tray for Your Parrot

by Susan Loebel

A Foraging Tray is a tray full of “stuff” for your bird to rummage through for long stretches of time. The tray is not only a toy to keep very busy in. Your bird should find buried nuts and dry treats or foods. The Foraging Tray serves to imitate some of the experiences wild parrots have in their trees or on the ground.

Below are lists of what to use for the tray itself, what to put on the bottom of the tray to “line” it, (basically, flat things that promote foraging behaviors such as digging with talons and beaks, tossing around and out of the tray, etc. – and to protect the bottom from getting soaked with droppings), and suggestions of toys and foods to put on top of the lining.

The tray should contain a good mix of beaking opportunities, foods to hold with talons, hard “stuff” to trim beaks on, and talon exercising toys. If your species weaves and builds, provide lots of materials for those activities in your tray. If he/she makes piles of toys and “stuff,” provide those opportunities in his/her tray.

My grey gets his daily nuts hidden in a foraging toy – therefore, he “works” for all his nuts. Be certain you provide as much “work” as you can dream up for your bird to do. This toy is a mind game as well as a physical foraging opportunity that our birds usually don’t have in our homes. Make it as challenging as possible.

To introduce a tray to a skeptical bird, make it simple in the first days/weeks you introduce it. With my suspicious grey, I just put the empty tray within his view for several days. I picked it up, turned it every which way while I examined it and told him it was a tray, “What’s this?” talk, etc., etc. After a few days of introducing it, I put a couple almonds in it. I held it in my lap and showed him the tray-with-almonds several times before I put it on his cage top. He still took several days before he would remove the almonds. He didn’t stand on the edge of the tray until it’d been around for several months! He’d reach over as far as he could without touching the tray itself to pick up whatever he wanted with his beak. I went very slowly with him. It was a 6 months before I could pile the tray high with as much “stuff” as it would hold.

Your bird might tear into a full Foraging Tray instantly. Use your own judgment.

What you need:

These are only suggestions – you don’t need even half this much “stuff.” I’m just trying to list different possibilities. Skim through the lists, and then read the tray assembly instructions before you gather supplies for your tray.

Some kind of tray

Any container – it doesn't have to be a tray. Anything shallow that holds "stuff" gives your bird a foraging opportunity.

Cereal bowls, paper plates, shallow boxes, feeding dishes, etc. will work.

An actual tray is a "big" toy, fairly permanent, that can be varied and used over and over forever – even the little guys like small "trays." Using the same tray repeatedly becomes familiar to your bird even though you vary the contents. You don't have to re-introduce a new toy every time you change the appearance of the filling if you use an actual tray. However, this would apply to any container you use over and over again.

For an actual tray, use a shallow serving tray that is as bird-proof as possible. It should be deep enough to spread all the "stuff" inside, (almost no rim for small birds, about an inch for medium birds, any height for the large species), but not so large as to scare your bird when your bird sees it the first time. For my grey, I use a 9" x 12" size and a 10" x 14" one, both with a 1 1/4" rim.

You can use any material, but beware of coated metal trays – your bird will know on the tray. A strong acrylic tray is easy to keep clean. Glass/ceramic pie plates and other shallow dishes work well, too. However, if glass/ceramic trays are on a cage top and can be pushed off the edge, they are a bad choice for obvious reasons. (Trust me, your tiny little bird WILL be able to move that impossibly heavy ceramic dish. I've beta-tested. I know.)

I've used unfinished wood trays that my local crafts supply store carries. They are very inexpensive - \$3-\$5-\$7 – and they last. I scrape organic material off the wood with a very sharp knife, and spot-clean it lightly with birdie disinfectant once in a while where there are seeped-in stains.

I've tried a basket-woven tray, but I pulled it when my bird became more interested in unraveling the tray than foraging and playing with the contents.

Stuff to "line" the bottom of the tray

It's fun to pretend there's dirt on the "floor" of the tray. Suggestions:

Dry, organic, colored pasta

Non-organic colored pasta, if you feel that's OK for your bird(s)

Paper towels

Tissues

Tissue paper in colors

Black and white newspaper

Other paper that is bird-safe (no glued, layered papers)

Curling paper ribbon cut into very short strips and curled Crepe paper cut into very short strips

Plain, unbleached fabric; washed to remove sizing, if safe for your bird (i.e., bird won't

get tangled up in it)
Dry corn husks
Corrugated box pieces, cut into strips and shapes
Buttons

Stuff to forage through – (will be placed on top of the “lining”)

Pieces of Shredders cut into short strips - some tied in a knot or two, (there are 3 different types of Shredders available now). No single piece should be long enough to wrap around your bird's neck, and don't use at all if your bird is likely to wrap his/her foot and trip

Short strips of bird-safe leather and rawhide tied with a knot or two

If your bird is safe with fabric strips, cutting off the row of buttons from an old garment you no longer use will provide button-removal fun

I buy 3” zippers and bra-hook replacements occasionally – again, safety first

Old bird toy parts; anything that is still safe but “doesn't work”

Cactus pieces

Unfinished wooden pieces

Wooden beads

Acrylic beads (Avoid the “rubbery” plastic that can be frayed by a determined beak)

Paper cups – muffin size, tiny treat sizes, etc.

Little PVC connection parts with no rubber or metal inside

Stainless steel washers, nuts and bolts

Cotton balls and cotton cosmetic removers

Popsicle sticks

Wooden spoons

Clean bottle caps

Small talon toys

Dried bird-safe corn

1” waffle balls

Small paper fans and other folded shapes

Bird-safe corks

Wooden spools

Bird sticks – the tightly wrapped paper ones

Foraging rewards

Hide these – at first, leave them in clear view. Then show your bird as you wrap a nut in a piece of paper towel, or whatever, and “bury” it in the tray’s contents. Once she/he “gets it,” that you’re hiding treats to be foraged for, you’ll be limited only by your imagination.

Nuts

Dried fruit – hidden or not

Small rawhide treats

Birdie cookies, crackers, toast and other crispy treats

Dried veggies – hidden or not

Popcorn, plain organic, wrapped in paper or piled into a small brown bag tied closed

Birdie bread pieces – hidden or not

Bell pepper seed cores

Bell pepper “bowls” cut from bottom of pepper and filled with food or toy pieces

Directions for Foraging Tray Assembly

Line the bottom with some kind of “ground.” For example, a bird with foot issues needs a softer lining, such as fabric or paper towels. For those who like the sound of crunching pasta, line the entire tray with several shapes, sizes and colors. Use anything small and rather flat for your lining. It will be catching droppings, so it needs to be easily removed, washed, scooped out, whatever.

On top of the “lined” wooden tray, scatter toys. Use a few, or pile them high.

With your fingers, forage into the piled “stuff,” and hide a few nuts, and whatever other treats are on the menu for the day. “Real” foods that aren’t too messy are fun to forage for, too. You can wrap apple slices, orange segments and other wet stuff in Cage Catcher paper, or plain white paper and “hide” them. Broccoli and baby carrots are examples of dryer foods you can hide.

Be sure to remove all organic material from the tray at least once a day. You can usually scoop and discard every day, and totally clean and dump everything every 3-7 days, depending on the size of your bird and how much time he spends inside the tray.

To remove poop from a wooden tray, I scrape it with a sharp knife, or sand it with sandpaper or a nail file. I spray birdie disinfectant on a paper towel and rub it into stubborn stains. Our trays aren’t spotless any more, but unless your bird licks the bottom, it’s as sanitary as other wooden toys.

Your bird is likely to chew the edges of your tray; regardless of the material it’s made of. I’ve gotten a year’s worth of wear out of ours without replacing them. I’d guess-timate our wooden tray life to be @ 2 years.

This is a toy that requires you to know your bird’s play habits very well. Don’t leave a Foraging Tray inside your bird’s cage when you’ll be gone unless you’re 100% certain it’s totally safe. I feel ours is that safe, but I remove it anyway because our bird is so young. I leave little foraging bowls or boxes inside the cage instead. Our guy always has something in his cage to forage in. Recent studies have pinpointed foraging as a missing activity in most captive parrots lives, and it is the one most likely to prevent obsessive compulsive disorders in pet birds.