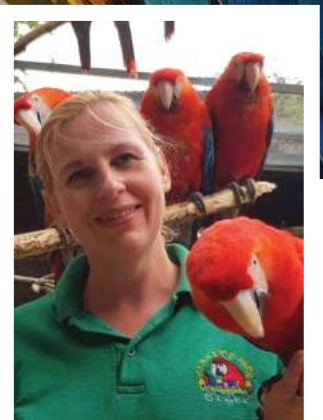


Enrichment can come in many forms, all of which can be beneficial to the life of your bird by encouraging natural behaviour and engaging problem-solving skills.



Louise Caddy, Head of Parrots at Paradise Park, UK
(Home of the World Parrot Trust) and some of her charges.



A Feast for the Senses: Different Ways to Enrich Parrots' Lives

Enrichment should be a part of your daily routine in parrot care as it can prevent your companion from becoming bored and possibly harming themselves or their surroundings. In part one of this article, we will explore three different types of sensory enrichment (visual, auditory and olfactory) and why they are beneficial for your parrot.

Visual

Research has shown parrots to have advanced colour vision, so their toys should reflect this. Many birds will choose to play with a brightly coloured toy instead of a natural wood one. There are many different safe dyes on the market that you can use to stain your birds' toys a more vibrant colour. I have made many toys for my birds and always found it interesting to watch and see which colour block a bird chews first. Some birds will chew a specific colour block all the way through before choosing another colour.

Sometimes something as simple as your bird's cage placement can be the most enriching. Some birds love to spend time when in the cage watching out the window. I know my own parrot used to love watching my pet rabbits running around in the garden, becoming quite excited at times and vocalising at them when they got close to the window. To change things up, I would wheel her cage to a different window and watch the traffic/people passing my garden. I always made a point of exposing only a third of her cage in the window, so if she wanted she had the option of staying out of view, but you could guarantee she would be there watching everything.

Finally, there are several bird DVDs on the market showing birds performing natural behaviours for your bird to watch. Watching and hearing another



*The macaws of the Kiwa Centre, UK enjoy their daily colourful treats.
Photos © Kiwa Centre*

bird bathing can encourage your bird to bathe in its water bowl.

Auditory

There have been many different studies done showing the benefits of auditory enrichment with companion birds. In the wild it is rarely quiet so some low background noise for your bird can be very calming. Many caregivers will leave a radio on for their birds to sing and dance along to. It is amazing to see how birds react to different types of music. My own bird, a Timneh called Mojo, absolutely loved anything by Barry White. I played Mojo a lot of different

music over the years, but nothing got the same reaction as a Barry White track.

There are several different enrichment CDs on the market to choose from with hours of different bird and rainforest sounds. Many birds respond in a favourable manner and many join in. Or, if it is safe to do so, you could simply open the window so you bird can hear outside noises.

At the Park we often see our male Palm Cockatoo drumming on a perch with a big stick as part of his breeding behaviour. Companion birds can also drum with suitably-sized foot toys to



*Top: Herbert the Palm Cockatoo shaping his 'drumming stick'.
Right: Iris, a female Kea, enjoys a flowery treat.
Photos © Paradise Park*

make a noise. Parrots likewise love to drop items into metal bowls to hear the sound.

Olfactory

There have been many different studies done on birds and how well they can smell. According to Professor Graham Martin, BSc, PhD, DSc of The University of Birmingham, UK: "It is now becoming clear that smell is used by a wide range of birds for mediating social interactions, species recognition, and finding potentially rich foraging areas... it seems likely that the sense of smell plays an important role in parrots."

When thinking about how parrots use their sense of smell I am reminded of how Kākā have been seen responding to different scented materials. And at the Park we are in the process of a study where garlic is rubbed onto boxes to see if parrots could identify the box by its smell alone (results are pending).

At home, I have often offered freshly cut rosemary to my daughter's budgies. While 'Goldfish' simply nibbled at a few leaves, 'Potato' went and rubbed himself all over the herb, so I am assuming he preferred the smell as he wanted it all over his feathers.

Bearing this in mind I have been keen to try different smells out on the parrots at the Park to see if and how they react. We grow many herbs at the park that we can cut and give to the birds fresh on a regular basis. These include basil, parsley, mint, thyme and coriander, to name a few.

In the next issue of *PsittaScene* (Summer 2021) I'll explore how to stimulate parrots' other senses: touch and taste. ☐

In Part One of this article (*Spring 2021 PsittaScene*) Louise Caddy addressed visual and auditory sensory enrichment for parrots. In Part Two she talks about satisfying your parrot's touch and taste senses.



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Louise Caddy, Head of Parrots at Paradise Park, UK
(Home of the World Parrot Trust).



A Feast for the Senses, Part 2: Touch and Taste Enrichment

Much like ourselves a bird's skin has sensory nerve endings that detect pain, pressure and temperature, possibly explaining why parrots are such tactile creatures. This should be considered when providing enrichment for your bird, and you should aim to provide a variety of toys not only different in size and colour but also in texture.

Tactile (Touch)

Most parrots when given a new toy or play item will immediately explore it thoroughly with their beaks and feet. Some will even rub an item over their feathers and under their wings. When considering different textures for them to examine the first thing I always think of is coconut shells. I use fresh coconut as part of my macaws' diet and often save the shells for other birds to explore with their tongues and beaks. It's amazing how long a bird will spend pulling the fibers off the outside of the shell. I have even seen some smaller birds use the fibers as nesting material.



© Louise Caddy/Paradise Park

Another item I like to use, and I think is often overlooked, is dried, mould-free tree bark. It can also be used fresh if it is to be used straight away. Always check it is from a tree that has not been sprayed with any chemicals. There are many different safe trees that have completely different bark textures. I regularly use oak tree bark due to its hard, nobby texture. I have attached this to my birds' cage beside the food bowl and they will often rub their beaks across it to clean off any bits of food after feeding. *Eucalyptus* bark too has a completely different texture for parrots to explore.

Ideally you should offer your birds a variety of different safe greenery types. (See parrots.org > [Learn](#) > [Reference Library](#) > [Health & Nutrition](#) > [Common Household Poisons for information about toxic plants and woods.](#))

As well as chewing and destroying, birds love to climb through and explore the different leaves and bark. I have often collected piles of clean dry fallen leaves from around the park and put them on the aviary or cage floor, where some birds love to come down and run through the piles whilst destroying them. You can also hide small treats or seeds inside the piles to encourage foraging.

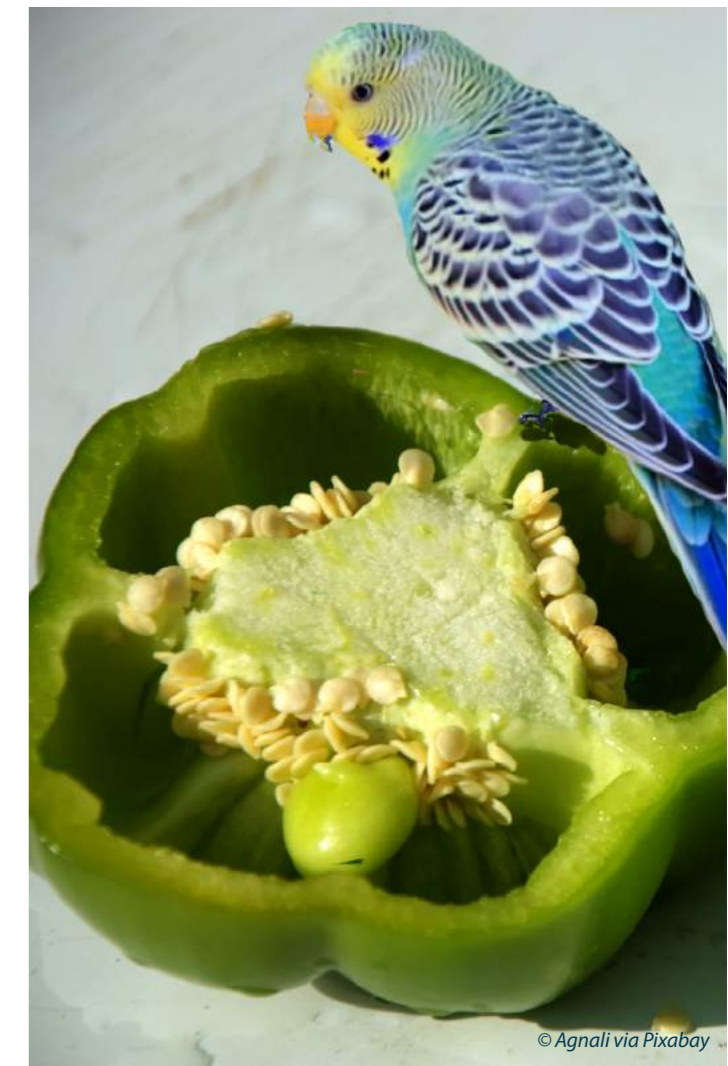
Sadly, birds being so tactile can lead to problems if not managed correctly. In the wild birds will spend a lot of time during the day grooming themselves or their mates. It is a natural behaviour

for birds to clean and rearrange their feathers and when they do it to a mate it strengthens the pair bond. I knew of a Goffin's cockatoo that would spend hours every evening preening its owner's hair; it got so good at this that it sometimes plaited her hair into her jumper!

Birds that don't have an outlet for these natural instincts can over-preen themselves, which in time leads to damaged feathers and feather plucking. There could be several reasons why your bird over-preens; stress, boredom and breeding behaviour are some triggers. In these cases, it's an idea to try and find something



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that your bird can preen so they can express this behaviour safely.

Rope toys are a good option as birds like to play with the fibres which they can preen, rub themselves on and arrange. Personally, I only allow my bird a toy like this under supervision due to bits of material that could potentially be chewed off and ingested. Some safer options are sweetcorn husks or strips of shredded paper woven through the bars of your bird's cage.

Taste

I have often wondered how good a parrot's sense of taste is after watching Amazons happily munching on some seriously hot

chilies! In the wild a bird's sense of taste is not as important as its sense of hearing, explaining why it has not evolved as much over the years. And whilst it is easy to think birds do not have the best sense of taste, any pet owner will tell you that their bird has favourite foods along with foods they refuse to eat.

Bearing this in mind I do feel it is important to vary your birds' diet and try and include as many different fruits and vegetables as you are able. Sometimes a bird will need to try a new food several times before accepting it. I have had birds that would not eat carrots until I presented them steamed and then they accepted them. Sometimes just lightly cooking them makes

them more palatable to your bird. Bearing this in mind I have been keen to try different smells out on the parrots at the Park to see if and how they react. We grow many herbs at the park that we can cut and give to the birds fresh on a regular basis. These include basil, parsley, mint, thyme and coriander, to name a few.

There are so many ways you can try to enhance your bird's life with sensory enrichment, and it should be an enjoyable experience for both them and you. It can be so rewarding seeing what they react to and enjoy. For more information on enrichment ideas, head to parrots.org/fun. 📺