

## Thinking Outside the Box

by Shauna Roberts

Parrots are cavity nesters and we see lots of evidence of that in our households: Greys that want to nest or cozy up to kitchen cabinets, Eclectus and Cockatoos that seek dark, quiet corners or places to hide, or Conures that dive down our shirts, and did I hear someone say wood chewing??

Years ago I brought Niles, who is probably a wild caught parrot Umbrella Cockatoo into my home. Hands down, he quickly put all of my other Cockatoos to shame when it came to wood chewing so I started to put pieces of wood on the floor of his cage since it was all I could do to keep up with him. Daily, he literally could easily fill up a kitchen garbage bag with wood chips! Niles was given an open wooden box or frame filled up with wood pieces so he spent most of his day chewing, scratching and arranging the chips. Going through dozens of wooden boxes, he did this for a year when I gave him a ceramic egg. I swear that egg put a smile on his face and he made incredible social progress in the home and with the flock once he had "his egg" to take care of.

Since that time I have given 4 of my 5 male Umbrella Cockatoos open cardboard or wooden boxes or paper bags to play with. They each appear to take pride in their projects and encourage me to inspect them while they click and clack their beaks. The bags and boxes have been great ways for them to exert pent up energies by tearing them apart and having these bags or boxes has never provided any evidence resulting in any sort of aggressive behaviors from these birds. I do have one Umbrella Cockatoo that is not given a bag is because the bag has the opposite effect on him and he becomes overly-excited and unpredictable. This is such an important reminder that to know your bird(s) is truly a study of one. Learning by observing that bird's behavior that a bag wasn't a good foraging item for this bird it became easy to fix by simply removing the bag....done!

I was contacted about an Umbrella Cockatoo by the owner who wanted a consult because she had given that Cockatoo a bag to play with. She had talked to someone else prior to me and had been instructed to immediately remove the bag from the bird's environment, and was told that the bag was the cause of the bird's chasing and biting the family members. I later learned that the paper bag was the only entertainment that bird had and once it was taken away, nothing was provided to replace this activity. As a result the bird's undesirable behaviors had escalated and the owner wanted the bird rehomed ASAP. Luckily, I helped to find a wonderful new home for this 'Too, and he is now playing once again in and with paper bags. Have there been problems as a result? Not one I have been told, and, in fact they new family has said that his behavior has been good for months now. This sure goes to show again that *each* case is a study of one and blanket beliefs may lead us down the wrong path. It's always best to carefully observe our birds' behavior and figure out what is or isn't working for each individual bird rather than make broad generalizations and not learn helpful information from the birds themselves! Just because you may have been told something or you had an experience with one bird doesn't necessarily mean that it'll hold true with all of them.

So that was sort of thinking "in" the box; now, let's move outside...boxes can be placed on cage bottoms for those birds that enjoy being on the ground such as Greys and many Cockatoos and Macaws. They can be placed there for use as foraging boxes filled with lots of different activities, sizes and textures. Some birds appear to enjoy throwing everything out of the box and that's fine as it's a safe way to burn up some energy!

Boxes or bags can be stuffed with even more foraging and activity materials. Place one a box inside of

a box inside of another box (an so on) with hidden surprises places in each box so the parrot has to rip through the bag or boxes and continue to tear it apart until nothing is left but a pile of shredded paper, cardboard or wood.

For birds that don't like being on the ground or cage bottom, they can still join in the fun. Cut up cardboard or paper and weave or twist pieces through the cage bars to be shredded up by an eager forager. Take a small paper lunch sack, fill it with toys and goodies and tie it to cage bars with sisal rope, polly rope or cotton rope.....like a homemade piñata! You can do the same with small, clean cardboard boxes, using cereal boxes and stuffing them with shredded paper, chopsticks, blocks, dry pinecones, wadded-up paper balls, beads, toy parts and some put in a few treats too, such as a few nuts, seeds or pellets. Sawing clean, old phonebooks into sections and placing them through the cage bars, either from the top or sides provides a full afternoon of foraging and tear-apart activities, albeit messy.

Select food-product boxes or cardboard, staying away from materials that have housed chemicals, cleaners or other potentially toxic materials. Most inks used nowadays are soy-based and non-harmful. Even phone books are printed with soy based inks, and are generally safe for your bird\*.

If you're looking for an alternative, another option in place of a wood box or paper bag can be a stainless steel pail or heavy duty plastic bucket or box purchased to serve as a toy box which can be filled with wood and paper pieces, toy parts, treats, river rocks, wooden spoons, s/s spoons, hidden nuts and treats among the destructible materials, etc. and this type of foraging container will provide many hours of activity and stimulation for your bird's improved life! I've seen pails filled with empty and clean nutshells with the whole nut or treat buried among the empties. Remember to clean up chewed pieces and parts daily to keep your bird safe and healthy and inspect all materials for their bird-safe qualities.

\*Remember, every bird's interaction is a study of one...and it's up to you to carefully observe your bird's play style and interaction with any new material. You'll want to watch that your bird is shredding tearing apart, scratching apart and maybe "beaking" the tiny pieces separated from these enrichment materials, and does NOT ingest any of these materials though gently beaking or manipulating the materials in the birds' beak is considered normal. Most birds are intrinsically intelligent, and easily learn from the materials in the toybox about what's appropriate to ingest, but your observations are critical to your birds' safety. Your bird may not "know" what's safe or unsafe to forage on, and cannot discern from a varnished kitchen cabinet door, a wooden spindle and even wood piano leg that these are not safe foraging items so and you must make certain that the environment is set up for your bird's optimal success by carefully selecting the destructibles, materials and sizes for the play box. The range of safe and available items of items appears limited only by our imagination and our bird's curiosity.