Round Table Discussion

Tips and Tricks for Foraging and Enrichment

As veterinarians, we know that the health of our patients is our priority. This includes not only providing the highest quality medical care possible, but also improving their welfare and well-being. Unfortunately, this may be more complicated in some species than in others, especially in our avian patients.

In the wild, birds spend most of their time during each day foraging, grooming, and interacting with their flock and sleeping. Some of these activities are more difficult to mimic for our pet birds than others. One of the most difficult is providing opportunities for foraging and enrichment behaviors. In most of our pet birds, the food we provide is readily available, and a feeding process that usually takes hours may take only minutes. This may be a contributing factor to a number of both medical and behavioral conditions which avian patients may present with to your hospital. The addition of foraging and enrichment activities to the daily lives of these patients may improve not only their medical and behavioral conditions, but also their general well-being.

Regrettably, this is not a treatment that veterinarians can provide for patients and clients in their hospitals. Veterinarians and their staff must provide information in an understandable and easily executable manner to owners, so they have the tools necessary to introduce these activities over time at home.

I have asked several professionals in the field of avian medicine to discuss their tips and tricks for foraging and enrichment in pet birds. The contributors include: Scott Echols, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice), The Medical Center for Birds, Oakley, CA, USA; Stephen Fronefield, DVM, Dipl ABVP (Avian Practice), ABC Animal & Bird Clinic, Sugar Land, TX, USA; Lisa Harrenstien, DVM, Dipl ACZM, Avian and Exotic Veterinary Care, Portland, OR, USA; Jill Murray, RVT, RLATG, VTS (Exotic Companion Animals), College of Veterinary Medicine, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK, USA; and Byron de la Navarre, DVM, Animal House of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA. I hope this round table discussion provides some new concepts to inform and help clients implement foraging and enrichment in their pets, as well as improves the health and well-being of these pets.

Amanda Marino, DVM
Associate Editor

Question: Why are foraging and enrichment important for captive birds?

Dr Echols:

There are several significant reasons why this topic is so important. The first is that by providing appropriate foraging and enrichment opportunities for captive animals, we help create an environment that allows for species-typical behaviors. This translates into behavior that is normal for the species. An animal cannot perform normal and abnormal behaviors concurrently. For the physically healthy house pet or display species, a properly enriched and engaged animal does not sit idly all day, scream incessantly, pull its feathers/hair out, or chew holes in its body. The implications extend beyond the beloved family member or zoo/aviary animal. As reported in the literature, research animals often display abnormal behaviors. While the animals may be physically sound, many are not behaving normally. This can translate into stress, which has been shown in numerous animal models to result in lab abnormalities or other deviations from normal. These are often the same animals that are used in studies to draw scientific conclusions. The second major reason to provide appropriate enrichment is for welfare concerns. As implied above, stress from inadequate enrichment can result in both physical and biochemical abnormalities. In many species, including parrots and other birds, inadequate enrichment has been strongly correlated with behavioral and physical abnormalities, which indicate poor welfare. If we choose to care for and house intelligent animals,