

Location is as important for fish tanks as it is for real estate. Remembering that the aquarium will be a centrepiece for viewing, placement from an aesthetic point of view as part of your indoor décor is the second point to consider after making sure the tank is not exposed to extremes of temperature such as a heater vent or air conditioner draft. And it's also beneficial not to have it exposed to sunlight as this encourages algae growth and temperature fluctuations.

The choice of fish is crucial but never buy fish the same day you bring home the aquarium because you need to do the set up and age the water as well as acclimate the fish to it once you get them home. Plan to buy them another day after you're fully set up, confident that everything is running smoothly.

You need to choose a filtration system of which there are three—mechanical, chemical and biological. Mechanical filtration involves the removal of particles of waste by passing water continuously through foam or other porous material. The filter traps particles of debris, and is periodically cleaned or replaced. Because solid waste is constantly being produced in your tank, a mechanical filter of some type is a must. Chemical filtration using carbon as one example, removes dissolved materials such as toxic metals and ammonia and is combined with other filters. And finally, the biological filter which has bacteria to convert the wastes fish produce to less harmful materials.

Confused? This is where expertise in assisting you in choosing not a filter but a filtration system comes from both research and an experienced fish enthusiast, usually known as the 'salesperson'. It's almost like buying a car stereo, except there are lives involved here. This will probably also lead to the question of whether a heater is needed. Because fish are cold blooded, a steady water temperature is critical and selection of the proper size and placement is vital.

A lot depends on the type of fish you are going to have, what temperature they do best in versus the average temperature of your room versus the temperature you are going to maintain. Again, your salesperson is going to help determine the right wattage as well as the controls and temperature scale among other options. And you must make sure your heater is working properly, running it at least a day before you add fish to be certain. A good quality thermometer is vital in checking temperature.

So when do we add the fish? Well, this is only half of the equation before populating your new environment. There's the issue of air pumps, gravel, plants (plastic or real), test kits, cleaning tools and of course the lights and hood as well as whether to have a background and decorations.

The scary part is really over at this point. Research and careful choice of equipment helps overcome potential problems as well as having a relationship with a knowledgeable and trusted aquarium expert because you'll be using them for a long time to come.

In our next issue we'll discuss choosing a reputable fish store and salesperson, choosing the last bits and finally picking the right fish for your community, transporting them and introducing them to their new world.



The first thing I learned about parrots after conquering cage size and shape requirements (see issue 7 Urban Animal) was that if your bird spends significant time in its cage, it needs toys to exercise its brain and spend time playing, shredding or picking apart.

Birds are highly intelligent and get bored without distractions. In the wild, they spend most of their day searching and working for food, foraging among the trees, leaves, bark and tearing things up. It's both for food and fun, so this translates to the cage environment as well.

As parrot keepers, we are charged with the duty of entertaining our feathered friends. Toys lift their spirits, satisfy some instinctual needs, and relieve cage boredom and stress. Birds love to pick, shred, undo and preen so there are a number of ways pet toys are constructed for their enjoyment.

You have a variety of materials to choose from: destructible, indestructible, foot toys, hanging toys, rattles, puzzles, games, pull toys, etc. You'll probably have as much fun assembling them as your bird will have pulling them apart.



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Toy Story By Phil Tripp

Though there are countless toys at pet shops for sale, they can easily be combined with ones that you make quickly and cheaply at home. Birds love to watch you make toys and it familiarises them with the toy so they are not fearful when it is introduced to their cage. With any toy, you should leave it outside the cage in view for a day or two to build curiosity and so they can get used to it.

Don't crowd a cage with too many toys. Birds need room to move and can be cramped with too many hanging toys. Always rotate their toys so they get new challenges and don't get bored with the same thing. Keep an eye on toys and parts, trimming rope and fabric if they get too shredded, watching for loops that can trap toes and feet. And make sure if they get pooped on that they are cleaned and scrubbed with hot water.

You can use some common things from your kitchen or bathroom as you'll see, and craft items purchased from stores like Lincraft and Spotlight or other craft stores. One of my 'finds' was a set of untreated bamboo woven hats for dolls that were anywhere from 30 cents for a tiny one for the ringneck to a dollar for one that would have fit over a teacup which our Eclectus took great joy in shredding. The same day I found a tied clump of raffia which became the shredding base for several toy creations.

Craft sticks from small matchstick size to what look like tongue depressors can be sourced at stores, often in bulk. I've also gotten twisted paper sticks and wooden beads that easily assemble without gluing. Plastic beads come in all sizes and don't forget to check out the infant section in a large toy store or baby shop for kid safe components.

Toy Story

Materials that are generally safe to use:

- Paper cups (unwaxed)
- Untreated wood like pine blocks or balsa. But not oak or wood that has been pressure treated in any way.
- Vegetable tanned leather strips. Rawhide only if unbleached.
- Paulie Rope (a special plastic rope for bird toys).
- Cotton white shoelaces (not poly or plastic)
- Uncoloured paper that has not been printed on.
- White tissue paper and unscented white toilet paper, serviettes or paper towels.
- Childrens building blocks, uncoloured, unvarnished but OK if coloured with food colour.
- Plastic beads that are unbreakable and the right size for the bird. We often buy these in bulk packs from craft shops and they range from small coloured beads to letter cubes and unfinished wooden beads.
- Balsa wood strips, cubes and squares as long as they are raw and unpainted.
- Hard plastic whiffle balls with holes to thread leather strips with beads.
- Bamboo satay sticks with the point flattened or cut off before serving to the bird.
- Untreated sisal rope (you can smell and feel if it has been treated)
- Shredded white paper (handy if you have your own shredder)
- Plastic solid shower curtain rings
- Non toxic, child safe glue.
- Cotton rope and paper rope that shred easily. (Supreme 100% cotton rope is best. This soft cotton rope is made specifically for birds using only natural fibers and is not polished for strength. You can tell by pulling on the fibers—you should be able to pull the fibers apart.)
- Cotton mop head replacement with soft cotton rope.
- Brown and white paper bags, unprinted
- Untreated raffia
- Wooden clothespins without metal parts
- Tongue depressors, Popsicle sticks, craft sticks—unfinished
- Ostrich feathers
- Raw nuts in the shell—the best toys of all!

Materials to avoid

- Metal parts (unless stainless steel) and things that are hooked, painted or varnished
- Galvanised or zinc coated metal parts
- Newspaper that has colour. Black ink is generally ok, but the less the better
- Soft plastic toys or plastic that can be broken up and eaten
- Leather that has been chemically tanned
- Sisal rope that has been treated—you can smell the creosote. Plastic rope
- Plastic bags
- Twist ties with metal wire centres

Always supervise your bird with new toys and play with them to show interest. Toys can be attached to the sides of the cage with quick links but you can also use cable ties so long as there are no loops to trap heads, feet or toes. It's always best to attach toys to the side of horizontal bars or perches so that the bird can hold on to something in case it gets stuck or trapped.

Keep cotton and sisal toys short. Match the size of the toy to the bird. Small beads may be fine for budgies, cockatiels or ringnecks to roll around in their beaks but large birds can swallow them. Watch the bird when it first starts playing with the toy to make sure it is doing it safely and not trying to eat parts that get broken off.

The simplest toy is a piece of paper wrapped around a treat (like a nut or piece of balsa wood or beads) in the shape of a cone. If it's just large enough to be handled by the bird with its claw, it's a shreddable 'toe toy'.

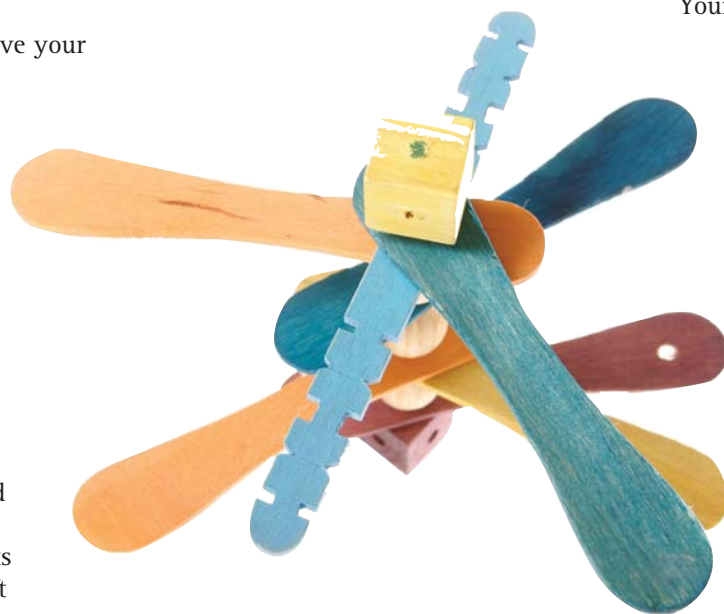
Another simple toe toy is a short length of leather with a few beads strung tightly and knotted at each end.

You can easily take a paper cup and quarter fill it with cracked nuts such as almonds, pecans and walnuts for hours of play. Scrunch the top to make a surprise-parrot piñata.

Toilet paper tubes and paper towel tubes are always recycled before they hit our bin. Making sure that you don't use ones from scented rolls or with excess glue, they can be stuffed with non-coloured bits of paper ranging from serviettes stuffed with nuts and beads to twisted bits of paper towels hiding a treasure. White tissue paper also unscented, inserted in slits or holes, also makes an easy shred apart toy.

One of our favourites is poking holes in the roll and inserting wads of paper, stringing paper rope or untanned leather through holes and threading beads through them. You can use frozen treat sticks (we call them Popsicle sticks) or pieces of bamboo skewers strung with items, removing the sharper end once poked through the roll.

Use an egg carton to put small toys and treats in each compartment, then use non toxic glue or masking tape to seal the edges only. Your parrot shreds the carton and finds the toys.



Get a piece of smooth cotton fabric, perhaps from an old cotton t-shirt, dress, pants or old shirt, and sew buttons on it. You can do this as you sit in front of the TV with your bird watching you assemble it. Use lots of different shapes and sizes, colours and textures. And use pinking shears to shred the edges a bit for picking.

Bamboo satay sticks can be strung with small washed vegetables or fruit pieces, shish-kebab style with some leaves alternating to be shredded.

Take a round plastic shower ring and tie small pieces of cotton rope, then shred it as a picking toy. You can also use leather strips and bead them with knots between each bead.

Take a small paper bag and fill it with shredded paper, treats, beads and cracked nuts. Roll the top, fold or crumple to seal and place in cage.

We used to buy expensive ostrich feather preening toys until we found a source for bulk feathers and cut our own, using small cable ties to secure them. You'll need to sterilise them in a 120 degree oven for ten minutes.

Cut strands of a cotton mop head, tie them together firmly and string them with beads, wooden cubes or other playthings, knot them or put clothespins on them to be pulled off. The cotton shreds easily and is a great preening or grooming toy.

Raw, unfinished wicker baskets can be used as a 'toy box' to fill with beads, marbles, wood blocks, buttons, shredded paper and other bits which the bird can pull from, shred, drop or fling. Simply gather up the castoff toys, clean any that are soiled and refill the basket. Leaving the basket on the floor of the cage (or in a large cardboard box on the floor in out of cage time) gives the bird the freedom to attack it from many angles or even tip it over. Remove at night.

If you have a small clean, untaped cardboard box, you can fill it with items and fold it closed to be shredded open.

You can always recycle toy parts as they're unwound, unstrung or cast off. Check for sharp edges, broken parts or loops that can trap their heads or feet. If they are plastic or metal or hard wood, they can be placed in a small basket in the dishwasher and pulled out just before the dry cycle to be thoroughly rinsed and air dried.

If your bird is super intelligent, you can use stainless steel bolts and wing nuts with beads in between for the bird to disassemble.

Toys can also be food items. Take large pasta tubes and fill with nuts, sealed with peanut butter as an example. Or give small pasta shapes in a cup to break up and play with.





Just to be safe

With rope and string toys, you want to make sure to keep the frayed parts trimmed and not have any loops large enough for the bird to put its head or toes through. They should be supervised when playing with these.

Don't leave rope toys in the cage while you are away as birds' toes can get caught in loops as they shred them. Same with toys made with cotton cloth. Never use polyester cloth or cotton poly mix.

Some SOFT PVC and vinyl toys contain toxic substances which can leach when chewed or sucked. If in doubt about a toy part, check with an expert.

The danger of using tree branches or twigs for birds are threefold. You don't know if it harbors pests or pesticides; you can't tell if it's been exposed to disease or droppings from ill birds; and there are a number of woods (like oak or red-wood) that are toxic to birds. Never use plywood.

Use C-links or Quick Links but make sure they are sized so as not to capture birds toes or feet. Do not use clips, split rings, lanyard clips, shower hooks or spring-loaded links or any fasteners that can tangle birds toes or tongues.

Do not use jingle bells (with a slit and bead inside) as they can pinch toes or get caught in beaks.

Birds love bells but make sure they are either stainless steel or copper and that the clappers are not lead and are securely attached.

Sources for bird toy parts

You'll probably have to have them mailed from the US since they're often scarce in Australia.

Birds Just Wanna Have Fun (www.birdsjustwannahavefun.com) is one of our favourites to not only buy parts and Paulie Rope but also an array of preassembled toys

Nalani Toys have a fascinating variety of parts at www.nalanitoys.com.

Avian Mechanics (www.avianmechanics.com) has a range of their own stainless steel puzzle toys as well as bulk bird part.

Busy Beaks (www.busybeaks.com) is a toy supplier I've used for years and they also sell parts and have advice on their site.

Parrot Fever (www.parrot-fever.com) carry pieces and parts for the DIY Bird Builder

The maker of Paulie Rope has great examples of toys and links to suppliers at www.paulierope.com

Bird toy assembly advice

There is an extensive amount of information at www.birdsnways.com/birds/ideas.htm

The book "Parrot Toys & Play Areas" by Carol S. D'arezzo has a great section on making your own and can be bought from Amazon.com

We hope you and your birds have a fun time making them and remember that birds love to pull things apart to see how they work. Just don't expect them to reassemble the toy though.



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