

# Bird Toy Safety Guide

*(How to help your customers make the best choices for their birds)*

**PLASTICS & ACRYLICS:** Acrylics are used in many toys today and if sized properly to the bird are virtually indestructible. Recently, there has been a shift back towards wood toys because although the acrylics are durable and attractive they are also not as fun for the bird that likes to chew unless they also provide an outlet as a foraging or interactive mechanical toy such as a music box.

When considering toys with plastic components a bird owner must consider the nature of the plastic component (i.e., soft vs. brittle) relative to the size of the bird. Brittle plastics should not be given to larger birds because when they break very sharp, cutting edges are formed and, if swallowed, could result in internal injuries. Hard plastic toys specifically designed for parakeets and cockatiels should not be given to larger birds with the beak power to destroy them.

**LEATHER:** Leather is a great material for birds to safely play with and chew on. Most birds like to spend hours untying knots made in leather strips. Only vegetable tanned leather should be used on bird toys. Bird owners should be informed to replace the leather on toys if it becomes soiled or wet as bacteria will flourish under these conditions. Many toy companies will sell replacement leather strips for this purpose.

**RINGS:** When choosing toys with rings or large plastic chain links make sure that the rings are of a size that the bird can't get his head stuck in them and choke. Also beware of toys with multiple rings looped directly together as birds have met similar fates when they have been trapped between the rings.

**BELLS:** Birds love to make noise and bells provide a fun source for their merrymaking. Bells should be appropriate for the size of the bird. Make sure the bell clapper can not be removed by the bird. If it is not securely fastened either remove it or weld it (we recommend silver solder). Make sure the clapper is not lead (toxic), if it is lead you will be able to dent the clapper with your fingernail. Do not buy toys that use jingle type bells, toes can become caught and cut in the wide to narrow openings, we recommend the cow, tube or liberty bell design.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Lots of different opinions are out there regarding what is safe, and the truth is that nothing is 100% safe. Pet professionals must read as much as possible to enhance their knowledge of this issue as well as that of the importance of toys to birds and parrots play instincts and styles. This knowledge will assist you in making the best choices on which toys to carry and also greatly assist you in establishing an on-going relationship with your customers.

Ultimately, only the bird owner can determine whether a toy is suitable based on close observation and supervision of their bird's interaction with new toys. Encouraging them to study their bird in this fashion will also help them better choose toys suited to their bird's individual personality and play style. Owners should not assume that if their bird doesn't like a toy that it won't play with any toy. Encourage them to try something different and to take the time to observe what their bird finds interesting in terms of design, texture, color, sound and size. Also recommend to your customers that they provide a wide variety of toys and rotate them in and out of the cage or play area. Variety is essential to keep these highly intelligent and inquisitive creatures from being bored and less prone to negative behaviors.

Increased understanding of parrot's natural instincts and their need for intellectual stimulation has been reflected by the quality and variety of bird toys now available in the marketplace. Super Bird Creations is proud to be one of the manufacturers that fulfills and addresses these needs by designing safe, entertaining and visually pleasing products.



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This guide provides a background on the critical importance of bird toys to avian well being, an overview of the types of toys available and a review of the most prevalent materials currently used in bird toys. Additionally, some design aspects related to toy safety will be explored. Most toy manufacturers adhere to high standards in the production of their toys and in the choice of manufacturing materials but there are also a lot of potentially dangerous toys on the market. The intent of this guide is to enable pet professionals to make wise and safe choices about the products they carry as well as to help them make sound recommendations to their customers who, as a result, will greatly appreciate their expertise.

### **WHY TOYS ARE IMPORTANT**

As a pet in captivity, birds don't have the opportunity to engage in the activities that they naturally would in the wild. Avian behaviorists who have spent time observing parrots in the wild have reported that playtime ranks second only to food gathering in priority. In the wild, a parrot's behavior is very active and playful. They have been observed stripping bark off trees, biting off and flinging leaves and twigs, swinging from and climbing on vines all the while chattering gleefully with the rest of the flock. Instinctively, companion birds are still very much like their wild counterparts. Playing with toys is a vital substitute for natural behaviors such as foraging, nest building and interactions with their flock. Toys and playtime address several important functions:

- In young birds, playtime is part of the learning process in which birds start to identify textures, colors, shapes and it also helps to develop coordination and dexterity. Exposure to a wide variety of objects at a young age helps to create a more confident, less fearful bird.
- Playtime helps to foster better mental health and a sense of independence. Birds provided with a variety of toys are less self-absorbed and exhibit fewer negative behaviors such as:

Feather picking and self-mutilation	Aggressiveness towards humans
Screaming for attention	Fear of unknown objects
Destruction of household furniture, molding, etc.	

- Toys promote exercise and therefore physical health and longevity. Birds who play by climbing and swinging on their toys reap the benefits of increased movement. Playing with and or chewing toys also helps with beak and nail conditioning. These activities also provide for "off-perch" time and flexing which helps with dexterity and foot health.
- Toys provide an outlet for natural aggression and an opportunity to expend energy through exercise. Instead of directing aggression towards their owners they can instead direct their aggressions towards the toy by shadow boxing, flapping and swinging.

Confinement of parrots without providing outlets for exercise, entertainment and mental challenge will result in boredom, depression, poor physical health and ultimately in an unsuitable pet!

### **TYPES OF BIRD TOYS**

There are many bird toys available on the market and the choice is daunting to some bird owners. It is helpful to understand how various categories of toys help to enrich their feathered companion's lives. Birds should be provided with a cross section of toys from all of the following categories to ensure that their physical and mental needs are being addressed. The key categories are:

**FORAGING TOYS:** Foraging toys provide an excellent outlet to require your bird to work for its food as it would have to do the majority of each day in the wild. Examples of foraging toys are those in which treats can be hidden, skewered and or imbedded. Foraging toys should be placed at a variety of levels throughout the cage to encourage movement and exploration.

**CHEWING TOYS:** Chewing is a major activity in the wild, especially during breeding season when birds are actively

burrowing nests into tree trunks. It is imperative that birds be provided with destructible wood toys. Larger birds should be challenged with harder woods and balsa, pine or vine based materials are excellent for smaller birds.

**PREENING TOYS:** Boredom and stress in caged birds can often lead to over-preening or feather pulling. Rope preening toys provide an excellent outlet for birds to satisfy their desire to preen and to discourage feather picking and mutilation.

**COMFORT TOYS:** In the wild birds enjoy physical contact with their mates, often snuggling up to them on branches. Caged birds, especially when they are alone, like to snuggle up to or crawl into something soft and cuddly. This alleviates their stress and provides them with a sense of security. Examples of comfort toys are snuggle rings, tents and cloth toys.

**MANIPULATIVE/MECHANICAL TOYS:** Birds are very intelligent and inquisitive creatures. Many are reported to enjoy untying knots, undoing nuts and bolts and deconstructing cages to escape. Providing puzzle solving toys and toys that require manipulation will stimulate these birds mentally.

### **MATERIALS COMMONLY USED IN BIRD TOYS**

**WOOD:** Birds need to chew, wood is an excellent material to satisfy this natural urge and helps to keep beaks trimmed. Birds most often play with wood toys and if only provided with acrylic toys they will find other ways to satisfy their chewing needs (i.e., molding, furniture). Wooden toys are meant to be destroyed. Some customers may be frustrated by the destructive nature of their parrots but if they are lead to understand that chewing is a natural instinct and that destructible toys are vital to their birds mental and physical well-being then they will be more willing to continue to buy toys that fulfill this need.

**ROPE:** Rope toys have proven very beneficial in solving and preventing feather-picking problems. Only 100% natural fiber ropes such as cotton, hemp (jute), or sisal should be used in bird toys. Poly-cotton blend ropes should never be used as they can result in serious injury and cuts due to the strength of the strands if the birds get caught in it. Rope can be safe as long as they are maintained properly and the bird's beak and nails are kept trim. Birds have choked and lost circulation to legs by getting tangled in ill maintained ropes. Bird owners should be informed of their responsibility to cut back or discard rope toys when they become frayed and present a hazard to their bird.

**CHAIN:** Chain should have closed and welded not open links. Un-welded chain provides sharp surfaces and narrow openings which have been known to cut toes or trap beaks. Make sure the links are a safe size for the bird, if toes get caught in the links the result can be broken toes or legs. Chain length is also a consideration as a long length of chain could conceivably end up wrapped around a bird's neck during a vigorous play session. As the wood components are chewed off a chain, a hazard could develop. Owners must monitor the status of toys and ensure that as they physically change safety hazards do not develop.

**FASTENERS:** This is a crucial area of concern as good fasteners are expensive and therefore many manufacturers cut corners and use potentially unsafe items such as split key rings or dog leash type snap hooks. Birds have cut and lost circulation to toes and tongues on toys utilizing split rings and spring type clamps. For conures or larger birds, Quick-link or Pear link fasteners are recommended to attach toys to the cage or play area as this type of fastener provides the least potential for injury. They come in a variety of sizes and can easily be tightened with a wrench easily to prevent the bird from unhooking his toys.

**ZINC:** There has been a lot of controversy about zinc toxicity in birds and pet professionals should be prepared to address this issue and alleviate concerns if the issue arises. Most bird toys are made with safe metal components such as nickel or chrome plated hardware, however, the use of galvanized (zinc dipped) hardware is also commonplace, especially for hanger bolts and washers. Many avian health specialists have stated that in order for zinc related health problems to result, a parrot must actually swallow the metal components and that "beaking" the parts is insufficient for toxicity to develop. If a bird spends an inordinate amount of time chewing on toy hardware with a flaky galvanized coating then it is possible they could ingest enough zinc to build up toxic levels in their system over time. The average consumer is not willing to pay the price for toys constructed with stainless steel components which are often 4-5 times more expensive than their galvanized counterparts. Owners who are worried about the possible health effects can often find stainless steel replacement components at the local hardware store.