

# Foraging for Health and Fun

by Chloe Redon and John Graziano

We first tried foraging after our blue-crown conure started feather chewing. Our avian vet suggested we try foraging as a way to distract him from his tasty feathers. The foraging was quite successful in getting our obsessive little guy to stop feather chewing almost immediately. All of our birds now adore foraging. When they come out in the morning and we refresh their cages with breakfast foraging, they can't wait to run back in! Our foraging techniques, which share here, are relatively quick to prepare and serve, and seem to make our birds happier than just about anything!

## Bowls

We use 5-ounce stainless steel coop cups with holders that bolt onto the cage. The advantage of the bolt-on cups is that, once the holder is secured, you can easily remove the cup without having to unclip a hanger or unscrew a bolt. We find them quite handy.

The 5-ounce cups are the perfect size for most small-to-medium-sized birds. Even larger birds can use them as long as they can get their beaks into the cup. For very large birds, the same cups are available in 10-ounce sizes and up. We use four to six cups for a single bird and up to ten if a cage is shared.

The best price we have found for these cups (IndiPets Coop Cup with Bolt Clamp 5 oz.) is at Care-A-Lot-Pets, [http://www.carealotpets.com/Products/IndiPets-Coop-Cup-with-Bolt-Lock-Clamp\\_\\_4264e.aspx](http://www.carealotpets.com/Products/IndiPets-Coop-Cup-with-Bolt-Lock-Clamp__4264e.aspx).



## Foraging Mix Food Ingredients

For the food part, we mix the following, but be creative with your own mix.

### Pellets:

- 4 parts Harrison's adult fine pellets
- 3 part TOP (Totally Organic pellets)
- 2 parts Harrison's coarse pellets

### Other:

- 4 parts "Just" dried foods (see below)
- 3 parts dried greens (see below)
- 1 part Lafeber Nutri-An Cakes (we prefer to Avi-Cakes)
- 1 part Lydia's Cinnamon Sprouted Cereal (see below)
- 1 part Lydia's Fiesta and Green raw food crackers
- 1 part cheerios-type Organic oat cereal
- a few treats so that every 5<sup>th</sup> cup or so gets one

Optional: small wooden bird beads

## **Pellets**

Choose whichever pellets your bird likes or add some new, healthier ones to the old ones in the foraging mix. Try some of the organic pellets that do not contain sugar and have less peanuts, soy, corn, and wheat. TOP is a particularly good brand and Harrison's is a favorite with most birds.

## **"Just" Dried Foods**

You can get the "Just" dried foods at most higher-end grocery stores. We buy the organic versions when available, including peas, corn, peppers, carrots, crisp-dried raspberries and blueberries – and POMEGRANTES, don't forget the pomegranates, <http://www.justtomatoes.com/POM-P.html>.

Do not use too many of the sweet fruits, that is too much sugar for the birds. Stick with blueberries, raspberries, strawberries, and pomegranates. Corn and carrots are also high in sugar, so go easy on them, especially the corn. Birds get a lot of corn in their diets already because of the ingredients in some of the pellet mixes. Some good mixes are the organic veggie mix, <http://www.justtomatoes.com/OJV-P.html>, the peas <http://www.justtomatoes.com/OJPEAS-P.html>, and the HOT veggies <http://www.justtomatoes.com/HJV-P.html> which adds jalapeno (always a bird favorite) to the mix.

## **Dried Greens**

For the dried greens, we place any leftover fresh greens in a dehydrator over night. We then crumble the dehydrated greens into the mix. If you have a convection oven that can be set to 100 degrees, that should work to dehydrate.

## **Lydia's Organics**

We use Lydia's **Sprouted Cinnamon Cereal** and the **Fiesta Crackers** and **Green Crackers** that can be ordered from their website, [http://www.lydiasorganics.com/product\\_list.html](http://www.lydiasorganics.com/product_list.html) or purchased in the "raw foods" section of most grocery or health-food stores.

## **Treats**

Oh, and remember to add a few treats, like a real pistachio or pine nut in the shell – enough that every five or six cups gets one. You should hear my Pionus when he finds one of those, "Oh boy, oh ... BO-O-OY!!!"

## **Optional**

And, you can toss in a few small wooden beads that are made for bird toys. Be creative!

## **Adding the Shells**

Combine the food mix with empty pistachio shells (see below) in a ratio of about 1 part food mix to 3 parts shells, so the birds have to pick through a lot of shells to find their food. For birds new to foraging, you might begin with only a few shells in the food mix. Or, you might try just the new dried foods, without shells.

Polly Pajaro started packaging and selling the empty shells for foraging after we asked if they had any empty shells lying around that we could buy from them. To purchase the empty pistachio shells, go to the Polly Pajaro website, <http://www.pistachiotreats.com> to buy them (their "Buy" link takes you to Amazon) or you can contact Polly Pajaro directly and have them sent to you directly from Polly Pajaro.

Polly Pajaro  
Little Creek, Inc.  
P.O. Box 245  
Lincoln, CA 95648  
Ph. 916-645-3585

### **Reusing Shells and Replacing Foraging**

We empty the bowls each night so that the cage has only fresh water in it. You can strain the pulverized food from leftover foraging and reuse the shells and whatever dried food remains. Store the leftover foraging mix in an air-tight container. We make up a batch for several days and store it in a medium-sized, dry-pet-food container.

**NOTE:** Be sure to strain the foraging DAILY. There is usually pellet and food “dust” left in the bowls.

We start with fresh foraging in the morning and the birds cannot wait to get their breakfast. They hang out on the playstand while we refresh their cages with bowls and they can't wait to get back in to forage! Especially those birds who have moved on to Advanced Foraging, described below.

### **Cleaning and Sterilizing the Shells**

If you're *really* industrious, you can reuse the shells that fall onto the floor or cage bottom by boiling them in water, rinsing them well, and then drying them in a 300-degree oven. A large chinese strainer is helpful in separating the shells from the smaller debris. Eventually, the shells will crumble and will need to be replaced.

### **Advanced Foraging**

For birds that “live to forage” we've made the experience more challenging by covering the bowls with brown wax paper. Many birds find this more fun than just the plain old shells with food mix. Our foster Jenday, Linus, has now advanced to several layers of wax paper and he couldn't be happier. We have found that if your bird likes the wax paper covering, it tends to keep more of the mix inside the bowl and less of it flung all over the cage and floor. For larger birds with stronger beaks you can also use pieces of brown paper bags.

In fact, our birds seem to prefer to fight through the wax paper and shells for their food, rather than have a food-only dish sitting right in front of them. The paper also serves as a wedge to secure the bowl tightly in its holder. This is great for mischievous birds who like to dump the dishes more than they like eating their food. We have even put some crumpled up paper in the bowls.

In addition to foraging bowls, we also hang vegetable and fruit skewers, and traditional foraging toys.

### **Extra Tips and Tricks**

Another way to keep your birds interested is to give them only enough foraging to last until late afternoon. That makes them excited to have dinner and even more interested in finding the last bits of food during the day. For dinner, our birds usually get chopped vegetables sprinkled with a little of the fine pellets or the sprouted cereal.

If you haven't tried foraging with your birds, it's a joy to watch. Birds seem to enjoy foraging every bit as much as playing with toys and grooming.

**NOTE:** All birds are different, so please do consult your veterinarian to ensure that your own feeding plan is right for your bird.