

# A Creative, Behavior-Focused Approach to Bird Enrichment

Volunteer Lisa Ferguson analyzes the age, species, and personality of birds in our care to create the most fun enrichment toys possible for them.



Mortimer the Turkey Vulture and Godiva the Crested Caracara with one of Ferguson's creations. Video: Lisa Ferguson

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It's a quiet afternoon at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey, but in Mortimer and Godiva's aviary, it's play time. The Turkey Vulture and Crested Caracara stare at a strange red box on the floor, inching closer with caution like a pair of cavemen investigating a crashed alien ship. Godiva approaches the box first, gingerly inspecting the pinecone in the middle as Mortimer watches from a high perch. Suddenly, Mortimer finds her confidence and nudges Godiva out of the way to see the box for herself. She pecks at the brown paper shapes poking out of each side of the box, resembling fish tails. The satisfying crinkle of the paper, the challenge of grasping the pinecone, the eye-catching red of the box: all of this makes for the perfect enrichment for this pair of raptors.

The Center for Birds of Prey has an entire volunteer team dedicated to assembling and distributing enrichment — anything from ping pong balls to tissue paper, sticks to paper towel rolls, that will keep the birds engaged and busy. There are strict USDA guidelines for enrichment, ensuring it's all safe for the birds and the environment, but volunteers are encouraged to get creative. Nobody does creativity better than Lisa Ferguson.



Some of Ferguson's creations waiting for distribution to the birds. Photo: Lisa Ferguson

Growing up in Lancashire, England, Ferguson knows about imperiled birds of prey: Raptors like the Osprey, White-tailed Eagle, Marsh Harrier, and Goshawk were extirpated from the British Isles in the early 20th century. The illegal theft of eggs contributed to further decline in raptor populations in the country.

Ferguson moved to the U.S. in 1998 and has worked for Disney for the last 27 years, in a field that she says inspires her curiosity about human behavior. When she started watching nest cameras, she realized she was just as curious about raptor behavior.

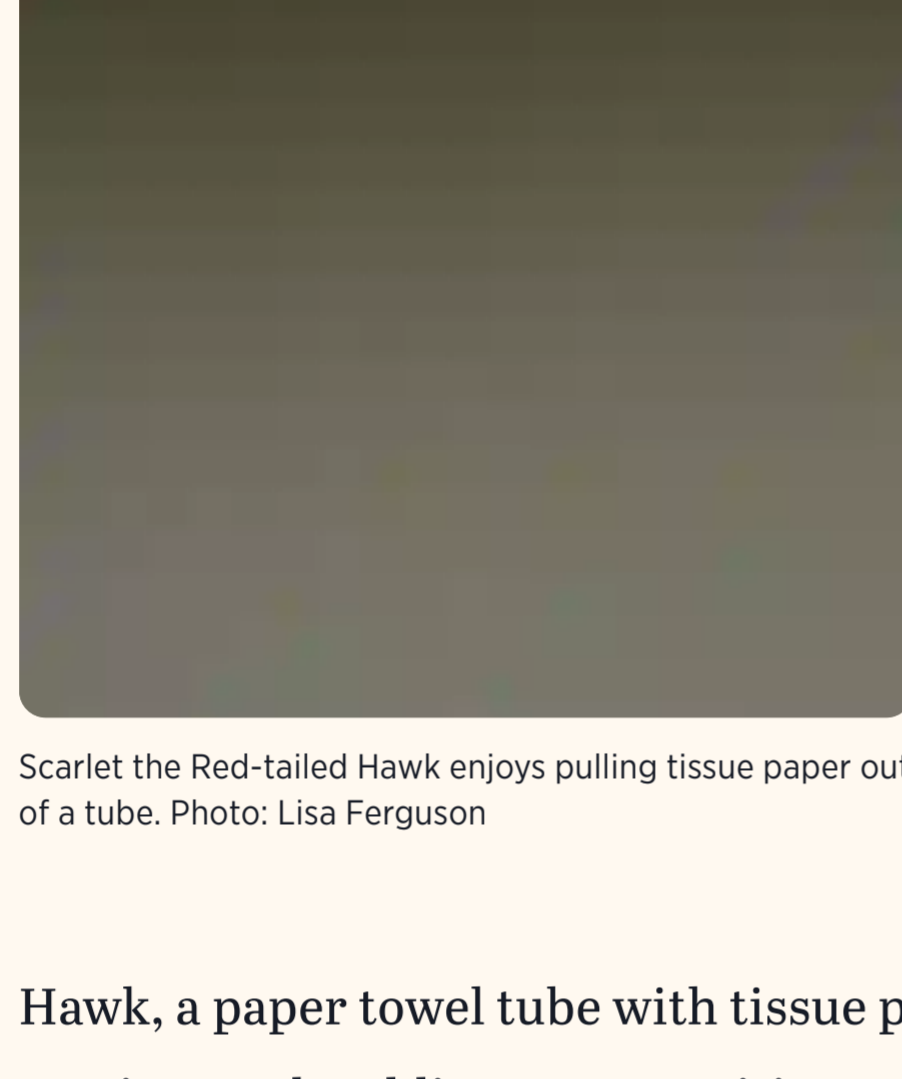
"Watching nest cams isn't for the faint hearted, but I'm not one that views nature from an emotional perspective," she says. "(Watching nest cams) is to witness the increasing challenges all wildlife is faced with, past, present, and future, and in some small way, be their voice, not silent."

In 2019, Ferguson took her interest in raptors off the screen and into the real world when she came across a call for volunteers from the Center for Birds of Prey. It had been a stressful year for her, and volunteering with the birds that fascinated her seemed like a perfect salve. She began cleaning aviaries one day a week, and six years later, "it has been more beneficial to my mind and spirit than anything a physician could prescribe," she says. "I found the peace and calm that I needed."



Paige the Bald Eagle, with whom Ferguson shared a special bond, passed away in December 2024. Photo: Lisa Ferguson

One bird was especially soothing for Ferguson: Paige the Bald Eagle, who passed away in December 2024 at the age of 30. But after several years of volunteering, Ferguson knows each bird incredibly well, including their likes and dislikes when it comes to enrichment. It's all part of a complex thought process she uses when designing the toys.



Scarlet the Red-tailed Hawk enjoys pulling tissue paper out of a tube. Photo: Lisa Ferguson

Once a week, Ferguson volunteers at the Center crafting enrichment and delivering it to the resident birds and those in rehabilitation. She thinks about the species, the age, and the individual bird's personality when making enrichment. For Scarlet the Red-tailed

Hawk, a paper towel tube with tissue paper flowers will provide maximum shredding opportunities. Young Bald Eagles in rehabilitation get materials that are intentionally difficult to shred, helping them build "strong necks and toned thighs rather than chicken legs," jokes Ferguson. Ruby the Snail Kite's enrichment typically includes a long, thin stick that she can extract and hold proudly in her beak.

Ferguson says first-year birds are naturally curious about new things in their aviaries. "They play like juveniles in nature," she says. "pounce on a pinecone, jump around on the nest while flapping, picking up sticks — just being curious to new things." Meanwhile, older birds are more suspicious of or even oblivious to the items. Those birds present a real challenge for enrichment volunteers, but Ferguson leans on her experience with human behavior to come up with solutions.

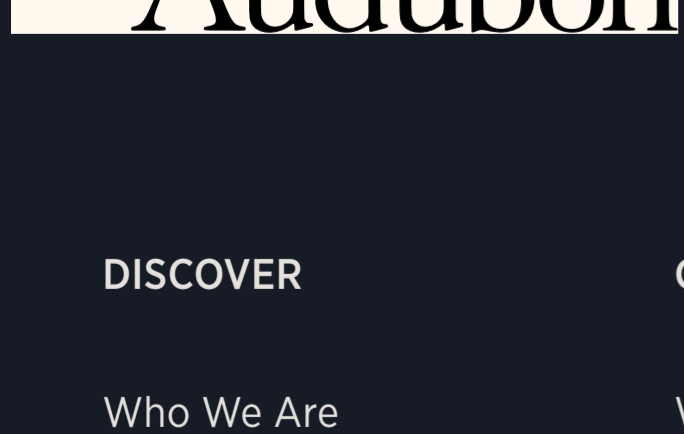
"I think that by focusing on a natural, inherent behavior and replicating that as best you can, you will ultimately tempt even the most obstinate of birds to be curious," she explains. "Be repetitive with your presence and really apply what you know about the species. For example, owls don't build nests, so maybe a 'stick-y' creation will fall flat. And you can stack rocks to mimic the preferred habitat of Peregrine Falcons."

The Center for Birds of Prey team recognized Ferguson's creativity and passion by naming her Volunteer of the Year in 2024, an honor that she says left her "blindsided and speechless," — similar to how Mortimer the Turkey Vulture looks when she receives new enrichment!

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