

Food challenges good for pets' well-being

Contrafreeloading puts a smile on my face. As a student of animal behavior, it is one of the coolest phenomena I know of. It has been studied in many species from rats to grizzly bears to humans.

It is so incredible because these animals do the opposite of what you would expect, hence the “contra” prefix. Contrafreeloading means, when given a choice, animals will choose to work for their food even when food is freely available.

Even when free food is placed right next to them, they choose to work, sometimes rather hard, to get the same food.

Growing up, I had chickens and pigeons. They would eat from their bowl until they were satisfied, but if I took some of that same food from the bowl and threw it in hay or on the grass, they would run over and start strutting and scratching. Kicking over blades of grass and woodchips, they would rediscover the hidden food and start eating again.

Recently I saw an example of contrafreeloading on the internet. It was a herd of goats playing with boomerballs even though there was food in nearby troughs. A boomerball is a durable plastic ball, (good for anything from cats to lions), that has one small opening. As the animal rolls the ball, food slowly spills out.

This is similar to the natural behavior of grazing animals. In the wild these animals would have to cover long distances to get fed properly. If the animals are given a smaller area in captivity, but are continuously rolling the ball to disperse the food, their physical and psychological needs may be met. This may not have occurred if their food was freely obtained.

You may have experienced contrafreeloading in your own backyard. Many people enjoy feeding wild birds. Many people do not enjoy feeding squirrels. Buying squirrel-proof feeders or placing squirrel food on the ground away from the bird feeder are options thought to prevent squirrels from eating the bird food. However, this is usually not the case. The squirrels usually end up performing magical acrobatic moves on the feeder to retrieve the bird food. The squirrels then come back to stash the treats that were on the ground. The squirrels may be enjoying the challenge the bird feeder provides.

There are several theories explaining why contrafreeloading might occur. It may be a natural behavior. Many animals are born with a need to forage or hunt. Being able to choose how to manipulate the environment, like accessing food from a toy, might provide them with the mental stimulation needed to prevent boredom. My cats can choose to shake, roll or gently push their feeder ball giving them endless ways to retrieve their treats.

Pets may be using these information-seeking behaviors to work out how to predict the location of the best food sources. It could be that they see the free food and know it is going to be there in the future. Therefore they stock up on the food that is a little more time consuming because they don't know how long that opportunity will be available.

A third theory on why contrafreeloading works could be the additional reinforcers that are part of the feeding device. Pets could be enjoying the feeding device itself. The way it rolls haphazardly, like a prey item, keeps your pets on their toes. They will appreciate the chase. The texture on their paw, the smell, color or the noise the feeder toy makes could also be satisfying to your pet.

There are a lot of options when choosing a feeder toy for your pets. You could purchase them at a pet store for usually \$5 to \$10. There are also a lot of feeder toys you can make at home. For a dog you could take a 2- to 3-inch wide PVC pipe and put caps on the ends. The length of the tube could be a foot long or larger. Drill a handful of holes on the side of the tube and it becomes a food dispenser when the dog rolls it. Another option is to place a pet's food in wiffle balls. As the balls roll, treats fall out.

Being able to provide simple food challenges for your pets is good for their well-being. Allowing pets the joy of working will keep them healthy and occupied.

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