

# Researchers seek to improve welfare in captive birds of prey through olfactory enrichment

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For the first time, researchers are exploring ways to improve welfare in captive birds of prey through olfactory enrichment- or using scent cues to alleviate boredom and encourage species-appropriate behavior. A new study appearing in *Zoo Biology* found that birds of prey, which had learned to associate the presence of food with the scent of peppermint oil, interacted more with peppermint-scented "sham" packages (i.e. without food) than unscented "sham" packages.

The study is a collaboration between Melissa Nelson Slater, psychology doctoral student at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) and Assistant Curator of Animal Husbandry at the Bronx Zoo, and Dr. Mark Hauber, Professor of Psychology in the Animal Behavior and Conservation Program at Hunter College. In the first phase of their experiment, the researchers introduced wrapped food packages scented with peppermint oil into bird of [prey](#) exhibits at the Bronx Zoo, so that the [birds](#) could learn to associate their meal with a novel scent cue.

Later, to test whether learning had occurred, the researchers gave the birds sham (empty) packages. The birds tended to handle scented packages more often and more extensively than unscented packages, indicating that they did indeed now associate the scent of [peppermint oil](#) with food. These results also support the eventual use of olfactory enrichment as part of the daily routine for captive birds of prey.

Not only have Ms. Nelson Slater and Dr. Hauber shown that certain birds of prey can use scent to find a [food](#) source, but their methodology also provides zoos with a novel, safe and effective means to encourage more species-specific feeding behaviors—particularly ripping and tearing—in birds of prey. The scented sham packages can be incorporated into existing enrichment programs to improve bird of prey welfare by adding greater sensory and cognitive complexity to mealtimes.

Provided by The City University of New York

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