

Fill the Bill

At-Home Activity

Each type of bird has a special beak and tongue adapted to eating a certain type of food. Assist your child in setting up stations to experiment with tools that act as specialized beaks to decide which work best for certain types of “food.”

Ideas of questions to talk about with your child before, during, and after the activity:

Do all birds have beaks? (yes) Do all birds eat food? (yes)

Do all birds have the same beak? (no) Do all birds eat the same food? (no)

If they're not sure, brainstorm together familiar birds and compare what they eat. Do pelicans eat the same food as robins? (Fish versus insects, worms, and fruit)

How and why is it helpful for birds to have special beaks? (You need different tools depending on the food birds eat, their beak works in the same way.)

Can you think of ways that having a specialized beak might be harmful to a bird?

Ideas for stations:

It's okay if you don't have these exact items—it's the spirit that counts!

Type of bird	Food	Tools *denotes tool that best fits
Hummingbird	Water in graduated cylinder to represent nectar in a flower	Eyedropper*, small fishnet, large scoop or slotted spoon
American Woodcock	Aluminum pan with oatmeal, fake rubber worms or bugs to represent crustaceans, worms in mud	Chopsticks*, nutcracker, strainer
Cardinal	Whole acorns to represent tough seeds	Nutcracker*, pliers*, tongs, chopsticks
Pelican	Aluminum pan with water and bits of Styrofoam to represent fish and other aquatic animals	Large scoop or slotted spoon, eyedropper, chopsticks
Flamingo	Aluminum pan with water and barley or seeds to represent tiny aquatic plants and animals	Strainer*, tweezers, tongs
Nighthawk	Pom-poms tossed into the air, which must be caught while in the air, to represent insects	Small fishnet*, tweezers, chopsticks
Warbler	Marigold seeds spread on a tree cookie to represent caterpillars and other insects	Tweezers*, small fishnet, nutcracker or pliers

Bird Beaks:

Hummingbirds: Have long hollow beaks that they use to probe flowers for nectar. The beak protects the tongue which slurps the nectar.

American Woodcock, Curlew, Godwit, Kiwi, Snipe: Have very long beaks that they use to probe for worms, crustaceans, and other small creatures in the mud and water.

Cardinal, sparrow, grosbeak, and other finch-like birds: Have very short, conical beaks. These beaks are very strong and can break open tough seeds.

Spoonbill, Pelican: Have long, flattened or pouch-like beaks that scoop up fish and other aquatic creatures.

Flamingos and some ducks, geese: have bills that act like strainers to filter tiny plants and animals from the water. (Only certain kinds of ducks are filter feeders.)

Barn swallow, phoebe, nighthawk, whip-poor-will, swift: Have large gaping mouths that act like nets to trap insects.

Warblers: Have small, sharp, pointed beaks for picking insects from leaves, long, twigs.

Other beak styles:

Can you find a tool and food pair to match the way that these birds eat their food?

Cedar waxwing, toucan: have very long, thick beaks for reaching out and plucking fruit from trees.

Bonus! Toucans also use their beaks to regulate their body temperature

Hérons: spear their food (fish) using their long sharp beak

Cormorants and other diving birds: dive quickly under the water, catching food in their beak, and stun their prey by thrashing at the water similar to a swordfish

Raptors: Use their talons to catch their food and tear their food using their sharp beak into smaller pieces suitable for eating

Woodpecker: use their strong beak to peck holes in woody plants, like trees and branches, to access bugs to eat

Ostriches and emus: use their large triangular beaks to grab and tear grasses from the ground

Egyptian vultures, gulls: break open foods by flying high in the sky and dropping it on rocks

Turkey Vulture: use thin beak to delicately pick through the fleshy carrion

Parrots: use their strong, thick beak to dig their way into fruits and crush hard seeds found in the rainforest

Shoebills: have a large beak that they use to strongly grip onto their prey as they snatch it out of the water

Cassowary: have a thin, conical beak that they use to swiftly grab fruit, seeds, and small mammals

Penguins and Puffins: these agile swimmers move quickly through the water to catch and snatch up their prey

Hummingbird



Flamingo



American Woodcock



Nighthawk



Cardinal



Warbler



Pelican

