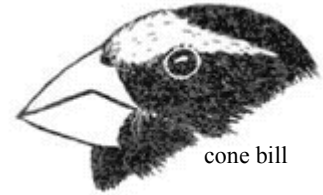




Pointed bill

Beaks and Bills

by Sally Cureton



cone bill

One of the most notable parts of a bird is its bill or beak, which is a solid structure. Their bills are constantly growing, like our fingernails. With the wear and tear of constant use, they are able to maintain them at the appropriate length. Sometimes an injury or slight deformity will result in a bill of an unusual length or one that is twisted. The shape of an individual bird's bill can tell you a lot about how that bird lives its life. For a birder, it is one of the most important characteristics used when trying to identify an unknown bird. Each bird's bill is shaped according to what that bird eats. For instance, a cone-shaped bill is a strong beak used for cracking seeds. Finches, grosbeaks and sparrows will have this shape bill to enable them to open the outer shells of seeds to get to the nutritious centers. A thin, pointed beak is found on a bird that eats insects. They are almost like a pair of tweezers and enable blackbirds, warblers and meadowlarks to pick insects off leaves, twigs and bark. Woodpeckers have a strong beak that tapers towards the tip forming a chisel-like instrument that enables them to peck holes in trees to find the insects that live under the bark.

Hummingbirds have a long, slender bill that resembles a straw. This enables them to sip nectar from the heart of the flower. In tropical areas many hummingbirds have bills that seem to have been created to match specific flowers. Biologists view this as evidence that the birds and the blossoms may have evolved at the same time. Beaks which are flat and wide at the base are found in birds which catch insects in flight. Birds such as swallows and flycatchers are also equipped with whiskers at the corners of their mouths, creating a funnel effect. Finally, birds of prey such as hawks and owls have strong, hooked bills that enable them to tear the body of their prey into pieces small enough to swallow.

A bird's bill is very adaptable and useful for many other purposes, in addition to obtaining food. A beak enables a bird to pick up, carry and otherwise manipulate objects, such as nesting materials. Some of beaks have specific adaptations, increasing their usefulness. A grackle has a sharp ridge on the inside of its upper bill that works as a nutcracker. Some finches have a beak that is strong enough to crack a cherry pit. A crow has a strong, general purpose beak that is like a Swiss Army knife. With their beak they can cut, tear, crush, rip and open just about anything. So the next time you see a bird that you can't recognize, look first at its beak. Knowing that shape can help get you started in the right direction for a correct identification.

