

Beaks and Feet Background Sheet

Courtesy of the Slater Museum of Natural History, University of Puget Sound, Tacoma, WA

These are some of the tool-like uses of beaks and feet. Beaks and feet are not actual tools, they only function like tools.

Beaks: Not all beaks fit neatly into the tool categories here. Some look like one tool but are used like another, and some beaks have multiple uses. The best way to find out how a bird uses its beak is to watch it.

	Beak functions like a...	Description	How it helps the bird get food and/or eat
	Strainer	Wide and flat; has ridges along inner edges	Allows ducks and some other water birds to filter tiny plants and animals out of the water
	Shredder	Top of beak hooks sharply down over the bottom; very sharp	Helps meat-eating birds shred and tear their food
	Nutcracker	Strong, short and thick; conical shape	Helps seed eaters crack open seeds
	Tweezers	Long and narrow, but strong	Allows insect-eaters to catch their prey
	Probe	Very long, slender beak	Helps nectar-eaters to slurp liquid out of flower buds and feeders
	Spear/Chisel	Thick, long and very sharp	Allows fish-eating birds to spear their prey in the water and woodpeckers to excavate wood

Feet: This is a rough guide. Not all bird feet fit into a category shown here, and some birds have feet with multiple uses. The best way to find out how a bird uses its feet is to watch it!

	Feet functions like...	Description	How it helps the bird get food and/or eat
	"Walkers"	Foot has three forward-facing toes , and one backward-facing; feet are larger than "clingers"	Allows birds to walk. Large enough to provide stability
	"Clingers"	Foot has three forward-facing toes and one backward-facing; toes are small but strong	Allows songbirds to grip tightly onto tree branches, cones and flower heads while they look for food (feet are designed to hold-on tightly even while they sleep!)
	Paddles	Foot has webbed skin between each toe or lobes on each toe	Allows aquatic birds to easily propel themselves through the water so they can catch their food
	Vise-grips	Strong, muscular toes have long, sharp claws	Allows meat-eating birds to puncture and kill prey, then grip prey for transport; feet hold food in place as they tear at it with their beak
	Crampons	Foot has four toes—two facing frontward and two facing backward (this is called zygodactyl)	Allows tree-climbing birds to easily move up and down tree trunks and branches as they look for places to peck for food
	"Long toes"	Feet have very long toes	Provides balance and support for long-legged birds