

Teaching Tips Beaks Are In The Bag

by Tom Hallowell

The class was perplexed when I arrived one day toting a grocery bag that rattled. "What does a winter bird feeder have in common with the contents of this bag?" I asked. Then I removed a tool, asking, "How might a bird use its beak as a person would use this tool?"

For the previous several weeks, students had been observing the birds that landed on their platform birdfeeders. The tufted titmouse usually grabbed a sunflower seed, hopped to the feeder's edge, braced itself, and hammered the seed with its beak until the hull cracked. The cardinal stood amid the seeds and quietly used its thick, blunt beak to crush the hard hull. Each bird used its beak as a tool--the titmouse as a hammer, the cardinal as a nutcracker.

As I withdrew each tool, the students quickly pictured the tools in action as beaks, and beaks in action as tools. A student then asked if she could reach into the "grab bag." Soon the whole class was involved in the game, taking turns reaching for the next tool and discussing how each tool could be associated with bird beaks. The great variety of ways in which birds use their beaks became apparent.

If you'd like to try this with your class, just fill a grocery bag with the following:

- | | | |
|------------------|-----------|----------------|
| -hammer | -knife | -nutcracker |
| -crochet hook | -chisel | -spoon |
| -comb | -straw | -paintbrush |
| -longnose pliers | -trowel | toothed pliers |
| -tweezers | -ice pick | -scoop |
| -tongs | | |

-any other tools that represent how birds use their beaks

The above tools can represent bird beaks in the following ways:

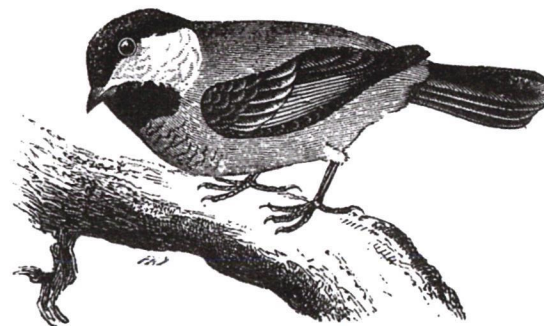
-A woodpecker *chisels* chunks of wood as it seeks food or excavates a nest hole.

-All birds use their beaks to preen--to smooth and arrange their feathers--as we would use a *comb* for our hair.

-Birds also collect oil from their oil glands and spread it on their feathers, like a *paintbrush* spreads paint.

-When building their nest, barn and cliff swallows carry mud and arrange it with their beaks, as a bricklayer *trowels* cement.

-A nuthatch's beak serves as *tweezers* to pick insect eggs from crevices in bark.



Common chickadee.

-Hawks and owls sever meat into small pieces with their beaks as a cook cuts food with a *knife*.

-An oriole uses its beak to weave grasses into its nest, as we might use a *crochet hook*.

-Most birds *spoon* up water with their beaks to sip or gulp it, -but doves and pigeons suck water with their beaks, as if using a *straw*.

-Long beaks are like *longnose pliers* that grab and hold.

-Beaks like *toothed pliers* help kingfishers and mergansers hold slippery fish.

-Bluejays use their beaks as *picks* to chip off pieces of ice, which they pick up (*tongs*) and swallow.

-And who uses the *scoop*? Pelicans, of course!

-Even the *bag* itself can get into the act--beaks hold the "groceries" the birds are bringing home.

After your students have explored this bagfull of "beaks," they'll likely watch birds at the feeder and elsewhere with a better understanding of and appreciation for the variety of amazing ways that birds use their beaks.

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Teaching Tips are a service of the American Nature Study Society.