

Quick Bird Beak Facts

Learn these interesting facts about bird beaks

By Rebecca Sweat

This Eclectus uses its beak to break the individual corn kernels off of the cob. Courtesy Lara Seidel, Florida

Softbill Vs. Hookbill Beaks

How exactly do softbill beaks differ from those of hookbills? "The only difference is shape and function," replied Larry Nemetz, DVM, a birds-only veterinarian in Santa Ana, California. "Their beaks are made of the same substance and have a similar structure. Hookbills, however, use their beaks to crush and crack food, and they actually chew their food as well. Softbills, on the other hand, use their beaks to pick up their food and swallow; they don't do any mastication."

Parrots have beaks designed to break open seeds and nuts and tear the outer skins of certain fruits they eat in the wild. The hookbill's upper beak is hooked and extends over the lower beak. This gives the parrot more power to rip, chew and grind its food.

In contrast, softbills generally eat a diet of softer foods, such as fruits, berries or insects. Some softbills are seedeaters too, but they don't husk the seed the way parrots do. "On a softbill, the upper beak is straight and meets at the tip with no or nearly no extension beyond the lower beak," said Gregory Burkett, DVM, an avian veterinarian in Durham, North Carolina. "The upper and lower beaks are normally the same size or nearly the same size." Their beaks don't have a lot of chewing ability, he added, but that's not necessary since they usually just gulp down their food.

What's An Egg Tooth?

Another interesting beak-related topic is the egg tooth. It is found in all baby birds. "The egg tooth is a small, pointed projection on the top of the upper beak near the tip," Burkett explained. "It is not actually a true tooth, but is very hard and made of the same keratin material as the beak."

Baby birds use their egg tooth to break out of the egg at hatching. "Most chicks will pierce or 'pip' the shell, then rotate in a circle, slowly breaking away bits of shell like a little can opener," noted Gayle Soucek, a pet trade consultant in Illinois and author of *Doves: A Complete Pet Owner's Manual* (Barron's, February 2006). "Once the chick has hatched, the egg tooth is useless and will separate from the beak and fall off somewhere in the first few weeks of the chick's life." The egg tooth only lasts for a short time, but it is a big part of the baby bird's new life.