

Behind The Parrot Beak

Take an in-depth look at one of the most valuable tools to our companion birds

By Rebecca Sweat

Parrots use their beaks for many daily uses including grooming and playing. Courtesy Robin Yusko, Connecticut

Hear the word “beak” and what comes to mind? If you’ve been keeping parrots very long, you might immediately be reminded of a particularly bad bite you’ve endured. There is, however, a lot more to parrot beaks than the damage they can cause to human flesh. The beak is truly a fascinating and unique part of a bird’s body.

For one thing, just look at the many ways parrots use their beaks. They certainly do use their beaks to bite people and other birds. A parrot might do that to protect itself, defend its territory, show who’s boss in the flock’s pecking order, or just as a way of saying “Leave me alone.”

“As prey animals, their beak is their only real defense against predators,” noted Gayle Soucek, a pet trade consultant in Illinois and author of *Doves: A Complete Pet Owner’s Manual* (Barron’s, February 2006). She has heard stories of parrots in the wild being carried off by hawks, only to return home a short time later, bruised and battered, but alive. A parrot’s beak is a formidable weapon. Even a large predatory bird like a harpy eagle, which could kill a macaw, isn’t going to get away without a bad injury from that beak. In captivity, it’s not unheard of to have a dog or cat in a household that is on its best behavior whenever the family parrot is around, no doubt in fear of being bitten.

Parrots also use their beaks for chewing, grooming, vocalizing, climbing, playing, caring for their young, and as a part of mating rituals. “A parrot can use its beak to tear, crush, grind and chew its food with ease,” Soucek noted.

“The beak is also very sensitive and dexterous, and can perform fine tasks like feeding a tiny chick, hulling a seed or gently preening feathers.” Soucek’s own cockatoo, if allowed near a woman’s head, can remove earring backs and steal earrings so gently, the “victim” will never know her earrings are missing until she sees them in the cockatoo’s mouth.

In many ways, a parrot’s beak is like a third hand in that parrots hold food, climb and retrieve and carry objects with it. If it’s breeding season, parrots in the wild use their beaks to burrow a hole in tree for nest sites. “The beak is a very effective tool,” stated Jeffrey Jenkins, DVM, an avian veterinarian in San Diego, California. “Just watch a parrot take a toy apart, pull the seeds out of a bean pod or peel the skin off a grape. They use their beaks just like people use their fingers and hands.”

Sometimes it seems parrots use their beaks just to have fun. In the Australian Outback, for instance, wild cockatoos have been reported disassembling the screws from the microwave towers there. The only reason these cockatoos would be taking apart the microwave towers would be to amuse themselves, and perhaps give their beaks something to do.

Finally, parrots also use their beak to show affection through preening and “beaking” their mates or favorite people. “When you see birds that get along well, you’ll see them turning their heads side-to-side and criss-crossing their beaks and touching. I don’t know that they’re kissing, but there’s obviously some kind of friendly communication going on,” observed Illinois veterinarian Richard Nye, DVM.