

Filter feeding birds

These birds have wide, flat beaks. In some cases, such as flamingos, they are very specialised in obtaining food from pond and riverbeds. These beaks have a filtering system whereby the bird removes the water and separates out the organisms on which these birds feed. Swans and ducks are also in this group.



Nectar feeding birds

These birds tend to have thin, long beaks, although the shape can vary depending on the kind of flowers they feed on. There are some species of sunbirds that feed on flowers inaccessible to most animals, making them the main pollinators.



THREE BIRD BEAKS THAT ARE UNUSUAL:

What we've seen so far is a very general classification, based on the feeding habits of the different species. However, not all species comply with this classification.

The African Skimmer:

The unique long beak is long but thin, the lower mandible is longer than upper one. They drag the lower bill while they fly over the surface of water, helping them to catch small fishes.



The African Openbill:

Its mandibles do not meet except at the tip. This is thought to be an adaptation that helps them to better grasp and eat snails. The mandibles also have a fine brush like structure on the cutting edges that enhances their grip on slippery shells.



The Puffin: The beak of the Puffin changes in colour. Puffins moult the the colourful outer sheath of their bills after breeding (seasonally). Their beaks brighten or fade when the old skin is worn down and the new layers are revealed. The vibrant colours may have the purpose of attracting a mate.



THE COUNTRY CLUB
JOHANNESBURG



Birds

Why their beaks differ



What's the difference between a beak and a bill?

A beak and a bill are actually the same thing! However, we tend to use the term 'beak' when referring to rigid or pointed beaks and use the term 'bill' when referring to birds with flatter, longer beaks such as ducks.

What are the different types of beaks?

Generally, bird beaks are categorised according to their shape and the function. There are two types of birds: generalists, who use different techniques to obtain food, whose beaks do not have specific shapes; and specialists, whose beaks are adapted for a single function. This could be for obtaining food in a certain way, for mating or for building nests. Here are the main groups of specialist beaks:

Birds of prey

Birds that feed on vertebrates have strong, hooked beaks with the upper part protruding over the lower part. They use it to tear and pull the flesh of their prey. Birds of prey such as eagles and vultures are a clear example of this. The shape of their beaks is not very varied among the different species within this group.



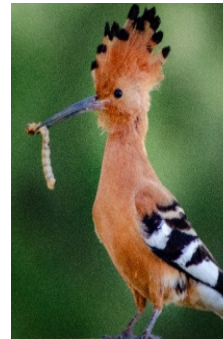
Fruit eating birds

Although they feed on fruit, these birds can also feed on seeds. Their beaks are specialised at dealing with fruit, which they open to obtain the pulp or seeds. They usually have a short, curved beak with a specialised tip for extracting the edible part of the seeds. The lower part of this kind of beak is flat and sharp, ideal for splitting the hard fruits. In addition, they are the only birds capable of moving the upper part of the beak independently. This allows them to exert more force, either to break seeds and fruit or to hold on to branches. Parrots and parakeets are in this group.



Insect eating birds

In the case of birds that hunt insects in the air, they do so with their mouths open. Therefore, the beak is usually short, wide and flat such as that of the swallow and the swift. Other birds catch insects when they are still. These have longer, thin beaks, such as thrushes, robins or hoopoes.



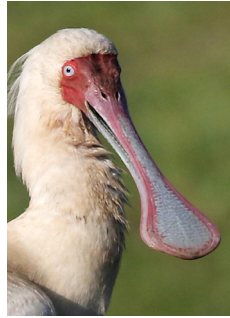
Seed eating birds

In many cases, they have a short, robust beak that are conical in shape, allowing them to break seeds. Finches, sparrows and canaries are all good examples.



Wading birds

These are waterfowl that have long beaks with different shapes, adapted to searching for invertebrates at the bottom of ponds and marshes, while keeping their heads out of the water. The stork or spoonbill would be examples of this type of bird.



Fish feeding birds

These birds feed on fish that they catch by diving into the water. In most cases they have large, strong beaks with a curved tip or serrated ridges to prevent their prey from escaping (like cormorants, darters and albatrosses). Others have long, straight beaks for piercing fish (such as the Heron). Fish Eagles and Ospreys are an exception as they catch their prey with their talons and not their beaks. Their beak shape therefore tends to fall under that of the 'birds of prey' category.

