



How Birds Use Tools

By Celeste Silling

Usually, birds are limited by the tools they are born with- their beaks, wings, claws, etc. But some birds have learned to make use of other objects to help them hunt or forage. We humans tend to think of tools as things reserved for only the most advanced creatures like ourselves or apes. But birds might just be smarter than we think.

Birds have most often been seen using tools to hunt or forage. The Woodpecker Finch in the Galapagos Islands is a classic example of this. These finches are not born with a woodpecker's long and dexterous beak, but they have still found a way to hunt the same types of prey deep in cervices. The Woodpecker Finch uses long twigs or cactus thorns to poke into holes in the trees or ground and pry out insects or larvae. Several other bird species, like Green Jays and Chickadees have also been seen using sticks to forage.

Other species have been known to use the combination of gravity and hard objects to get their meals. If you live near the shore, you might've seen a seagull dropping a shellfish on the rocks or pavement. This is an act of ingenuity, not clumsiness, as the force of the drop often opens up the hard shell for the gull to eat the insides. Similarly, Egyptian Vultures drop stones on Ostrich eggs to crack the shells without spilling too much of the yummy insides.

Another tool that some birds use is bait. Burrowing Owls have occasionally been known to gather up dung from other animals and put it around their burrows. The dung attracts dung beetles, which the owls feed upon. In a study of this hunting method, scientists saw that the owls that used bait

consumed ten times more beetles than the ones who didn't. The use of bait has been seen in other species such as the Striated Herons of Japan who use bread crumbs to coax fish to the surface of the water.

An even more impressive use of tools can be seen in the Black Kites of Australia. These and other birds of prey find easy meals when small prey are fleeing from brush fires. Impatient for the fire to spread, Black Kites have been seen taking a burning stick from the fire, flying to an unburnt area of grass, and dropping it to start a new fire. Their attempts are often successful and the fire spreads, driving hiding prey from the brush.

Crows and other Corvids are perhaps the most well-known tool users in the bird kingdom. These genius birds can actually make their own tools from single or multiple components. In one experiment, crows were able to bend a wire to form a hook which they then used to grab and lift something out of a container. In another experiment, crows were able to combine two short sticks to make one long enough to reach the treat they were after.

There are many other bird species who have shown the ability to use tools. Puffins can grasp twigs in their beaks and use them to scratch themselves. Loggerhead Shrikes can impale their prey on barbed wire and other sharp objects. The Tailorbirds of Asia use spider silk or fibers to sew together leaves to make their nests. With all that we now know about tool-use in birds, the term "bird brain" no longer has quite the sting it used to!

Photo caption: A Loggerhead Shrike impales a cricket on a sharp thorn. Photo by Tonya Seitz.