

# PET TALES

## Get beaky!

A healthy bird needs a beak that means business

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Universal Press Syndicate

The beak of a bird is a tool with many features. It's a weapon that can put a dent in an enemy or damage the relationship with a friend. It can be a delicate tool for feeding a newly hatched chick or for the precise adjustment of feathers while grooming. With their beaks, birds can pick a lock, crush a walnut or peel the skin off a grape.

Beak shapes and sizes vary widely, depending mostly on the kind of food a certain species eats. The short, straight bill of canaries and other finches is ideal for plucking out seeds, grubs and other edibles. Birds of the parrot family — including budgies, cockatiels and the larger parrots such as macaws — are known as "hookbills," because of the shape and function of their beaks.

At its most basic, the beak on our pet parrots consists of two hard structures, the upper and lower mandibles, along with an amazingly agile and strong tongue.

The beaks of most parrots are remarkably well-designed for one of their most important tasks: cracking, crushing, prying or otherwise destroying the protective coatings around many of the foods they like to eat. Like everything else on a creature designed for

flight, the beak is surprisingly lightweight considering its strength — a hard shell of constantly growing material (similar to that found on antlers) placed over a hollow bony structure. (If a beak were made of solid bone, its weight would probably force a bird to spend his life on the ground, and on his nose.)

Lightweight it may be, but the hookbill's beak is also very strong. Although a person would need a hammer or nutcracker to get through hard shells to the nut meat, a bird needs only his beak — and perhaps a foot to hold the nut in place. A parrot will rotate the seed to find the seam with his tongue, apply pressure to crack it at this weak spot, and then rotate it again to slide the meat free — all in a few seconds' time.

A parrot has such strength in his beak that owners are often surprised to see even the bars of a metal cage fall victim. Birds have been known to pick off the welds holding bars together — and sometimes get lead or zinc poisoning as a result — or even snap the bars themselves. That's why a cheap cage with shoddy construction will turn out to be no bargain when faced with the destructive abilities of a bird.

Contrary to advice that still can be found in books or on the Internet, beak trims should not be a part of routine health maintenance



The formidable beak of the blue-and-gold macaw is an all-purpose tool that puts the Swiss Army knife to shame.

for birds. Although beaks constantly grow at a rate of 1 to 3 inches per year, depending on the species, the beak of a healthy bird will remain at a healthy length with normal chewing activities.

Overgrowth of the beak is frequently a sign of illness, such as liver disease or malnutrition. Any bird whose beak seems to be too long needs to see a veterinarian expert in avian medicine to determine the cause of the problem and treat it accordingly.

Using those beaks often is essential to both the physical and emotional well-being of birds. Even finches and canaries will often have better beak health if you provide cuttlebone or another hard material for them to work with their beaks while in their cage. As a caring bird-keeper, be sure you're doing more for your bird's beak than just admiring its amazing form and function. Provide your pet bird with lots of things to chew on, an unending variety of toys and perches meant to be gleefully destroyed. ■

### Pets of the Week



**>>Wing**  
Wing (385960) is a 9-month-old boy with a fetching white collar around his neck. His owners gave him up when they moved. He is well behaved, faithfully uses his litter box and loves to play with toys.



**>>Mac**  
Mac (386467) is a one-year-old male Rottweiler mix. He is gentle with children and likes other dogs.

### To adopt a pet

These are just a few of the many dogs and cats available at Lee County Animal Services, 5600 Banner Drive, Fort Myers. Call 432-2083 or visit the agency's Web site at [www.leelostpets.com](http://www.leelostpets.com). Adoption applications may be downloaded from the site or completed at the shelter, which is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday. Please use the animal's ID number when inquiring about it. The adoption fee is \$65 for dogs and \$50 for cats.

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