

Irene Finley & Sam Rodden - Sept 16, 43

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BIRD BILLS FOR BUSINESS

by

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Irene Finley
Photographs by William L. Finley

There is no more wonderful fact in nature than the way in which birds have inherited the earth and have adapted themselves physically to getting their food from it and making their homes upon it. Necessity is still the mother of invention and along with the evolutionary growing pains has produced some astonishing results. Man has developed mentally until he is almost top-heavy, but has not changed much physically. He has chosen rather to invent and improve mechanical implements for his greatest needs and struggles in life. Witness the brain achievements, especially under the impetus and stress of war.

The birds don't go to war with each other. They have gone their simple way, lengthening a bill here, shortening a leg there or stretching it into a stilt, growing a vicious, hooked claw for murder, and adding some accessories for utility - most all of it from the urge of hunger. For the most part, they have enhanced their beauty of symmetry and color, but in some cases as to looks - oh my, when you see their faces!

When it comes to hunting a living, birds like people, have individual tastes, and every form of vegetable and animal life is used as food by one or another species. A bird has to hunt its food, build its home, defend itself and its young, and even dress its plumage chiefly with one tool, its bill. Hardly any two species use their beaks in the same manner; though a number may live on the same food. The finding and catching of food being the most important problem that the bird has to solve for itself, especially the catching, it is for these purposes that we find bills the most adapted.

The hummingbird and swallow both feed upon insects and are somewhat closely related to each other, but they have extremely opposite facial make-ups. The wide, flattened mouth with only a pin-point of a bill of the swallow

gapes from ear to ear as the bird flashes about in the sky and almost turns somersaults scooping in gnats and flies. The hummingbird buzzes its wings at great speed to stand on the air and probe the flowers for nectar and infinitesimal insects with its long, slender needle of a bill. It feeds its young by regurgitation, thrusting its sharp dagger down the baby's throat to the very hilt, and commences a pumping operation that looks as if she was puncturing him to the toes. But he licks his lips and flutters his wings as if enjoying this sword-swallowing stunt. And forthwith he proceeds to grow the same kind of a face.

The great blue heron and the pelican are both expert fishers. The heron has a long, heavy bill and eyes on the lower sides of its face, enabling it to look down into the water without a movement. It stands on its long, stilt legs as frozen as a sphinx in the shallow water near a river bank. When a fish swims by underneath, it makes a lightening thrust, and Mr. Fish is held by a strong pair of pincers. The pelican is also found on inland lakes, rivers, and seashore. The heavy bird swims about and spying a fish, he distends his big pouch or fish-basket and simply engulfs his dinner. Then straining out the water, he sometimes tosses the be-fuddled fish into the air and gulps it down head-first. Sometimes a parade of pelicans will circle in the air over a school of fish, and one after another will dive like plummet. Coming up with his catch, water-logged and helpless, the pelican is often the victim of a sagacious gull. When the pelican lifts its bill to drain off the water, the fast-working gull snatches the booty and is off on the wing before the clumsy fisherman knows what it's all about.

Shallow shorelines with pebbles and shells embedded in the ooze and mud furnish food for birds with beaks adapted to prying and probing. A collection of bills of wading birds would resemble a kit of surgical tools, some bent up at the tip, some bent down, some crossed like a pair of crooked pliers. The avocet has a pair of recurved pliers. He walks slowly along swishing his slender, up-turned bill in the shallow water and mud for chance food, or he pokes into fissures between stones or rock crannies for a snail

or a worm.

The bill of the every-day purple finch is short and stout for cracking seeds. The fierce-looking beak of the eagle is for tearing its food, while the strong, sharp talons are for seizing its prey.

The crow and the raven are modern birds with a non-restricted diet, as most farmers have found out. The strong-minded crow with his ample beak all too easily digs up newly planted corn, probably laughing at the grotesque joke of a scare-crow flapping in the wind. If the raspberry patch is handy, he samples that, too. Next you will find him boldly stealing the eggs or young of common birds such as the thrush, sparrow, warbler, or walking pigeon-toed up to a quail nest on the ground where he devours a double meal of ten or a dozen eggs. In the desert he picks up a wood-rat, grasshoppers, or anything edible at hand. On the beach he doesn't pass up lunch refuse or washed-up worms, and he even ducks his head into a pool for a shrimp. On land or sea he is ambi-dextrous with that sensible, all-use appendage on his face. No wonder he is unworried and nonchalant. Let the other fellow do it, his expression says. Physically and mentally, he is the essence of adaptability for all of his needs.

There is a whole world of individuality in the way birds choose and build their homes. And all of the important work is done with the bill. Look at the cup-shaped nests of the barn swallow which are commonly built under the eaves of a building or on a rafter under a bridge. Watch the swallows gather mud in a rain pool by the roadside. You may see a dozen or more dipping their bills into the mud, all excited with their wings fluttering like butterflies. They are gathering loads to carry back and plaster against some wall. The swallow works like a cement expert, daubing a mouthful here and there, mixing straws with it, smoothing and binding it with saliva, using her bill as a trowel. Out of it comes a rock-solid, feather-lined habitation that must thrill the young ones to sleep in.

Watch the house wren start to build her nest in her old-time box. She collects small, dry twigs and is as busy as a bee coming and going, drop-

ping the foundation for the bed into the bottom of the box. Once in a while she squeezes inside and you can hear the hollow rattling as the contents are shuffled about. She doesn't want the slats to hump up in the center. As the pile inside the box increases, her troubles begin. She blithly alights on the doorstep with a longer stick which has a little elbow joint in it. Grasping the end of it, she starts it in. Then she reaches back and gets a hold on it and begins to shove it in inch by inch. But it stalls square across the threshold. She tugs and pushes till she is out of breath. Then she sits down on the doorstep with a dejected air.

Beginning again, she turns the stick over a little and pushes like a beaver driving a log into one of his dams. With a lot of squirming and maneuvering, she finally sees the end of it disappear. Squinting in the doorway, she sees a jumble like a log jam. But she sticks her bill in as far as she can and begins to poke about, and finally is satisfied. "That's that. The feather-bed can go in later," her expression says. What a bill!