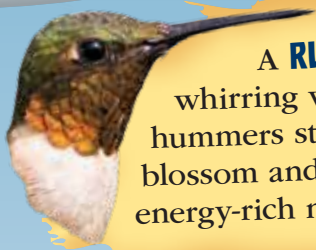


JAWS OF LIFE

by Matt Seek

GREAT BLUE HERONS wade slowly through shallow water. When the leggy, long-necked fish-munchers spot dinner ... *Splash!* They jab their spear-like beaks into the drink. Herons usually trap prey between their beaks, but sometimes a heron uses its beak to actually spear a fish.

Birds use beaks to weave nests, groom feathers, fight attackers, and capture food. With so many uses, it isn't surprising that beaks come in all shapes and sizes. To see for yourself, sneak a peek at this buffet of beaks.



A **RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD'S** whirring wings run on flower power. To refuel, hummers stick their skinny snoots deep in a blossom and use their long tongues to lick up the energy-rich nectar inside.

PILEATED WOODPECKERS

bang their sharp, burly beaks against trees. The holes they hammer out contain carpenter ants and other insects that hungry woodpeckers capture with their extra long tongues.



COMMON YELLOWTHROATS are itty-bitty birds that hop quickly through tangled vegetation. Along the way, they use their tweezer-like beaks to pluck insects off leaves and snap up spiders from hidey-holes in bark.



Comb-like ridges called **lamellae** (*lah-mel-lay*) line the edges of a **NORTHERN SHOVELER'S** beak. Lamellae work like a spaghetti strainer. When a shoveler scoops a mouthful of marsh water, the water flows out, but seeds and insects get trapped for the duck to munch.

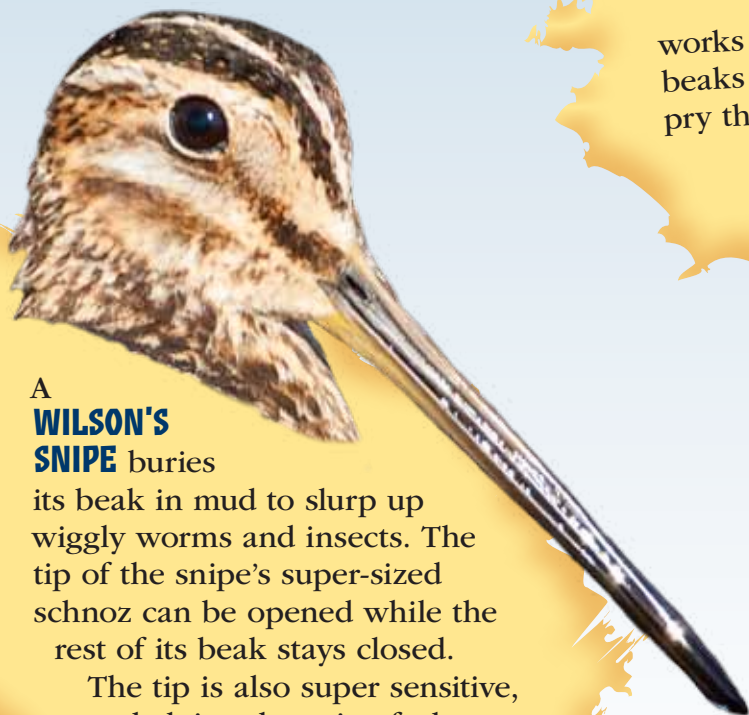


A **NORTHERN CARDINAL'S** stout snout is made for cracking seeds. Grooves in the cardinal's upper beak hold seeds steady while its sharp lower beak swings shut, crushing each seed's tough shell.

Birds don't have teeth to chew food, so they swallow it whole. (Wouldn't your mom be *horrified*?) But big critters are tough for birds to choke down. **RED-TAILED HAWKS** use their sharp, hooked beaks to shred squirrels and rabbits into bite-sized nuggets.



The tips of a **RED CROSSBILL'S** upper and lower beaks don't line up — they're crossed. But this bird doesn't need braces. Its beak works just fine. Crossbills wedge their freaky beaks into pine cones, using the crossed tips to pry the cones open and pluck out seeds.



A **WILSON'S SNIPE** buries its beak in mud to slurp up wiggly worms and insects. The tip of the snipe's super-sized schnoz can be opened while the rest of its beak stays closed. The tip is also super sensitive, helping the snipe feel hidden prey.



If a **COMMON MERGANSER** manages to get its beak around a minnow, the lucky duck doesn't want dinner to swim away. To keep that from happening, a merganser's beak has pointy, toothlike lamellae that are perfect for holding slippery fishies.



When an **AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN** wishes for fishes, it plunges its beak underwater like a dip net. With a single scoop, the big-beaked bird gathers three gallons of water — and several unlucky fish. It tips its beak to drain the water and swallows any fish left behind.