

Have a Nature Question?

ASK AL

Al Grass has worked as a career park naturalist and ranger throughout BC. Now he is a well-known nature tour leader and photographer. Al especially likes birds, insects and spiders.



Q: Why do American Robins and Varied Thrush like to dig around and turn over dead leaves?

Robins and Varied Thrush are not the only birds that flip over fallen leaves – crows, towhees, fox sparrows, song sparrows and ruffed grouse, to name a few more, also do 'leaf tossing' or simply scratch through the leaf litter, hunting for tasty treats like insects, spiders, worms and seeds.

Leaf litter is a rich source of food for Robins, Varied Thrush and other birds. This is why I ask all of you who have gardens to please leave the fallen leaves under trees and bushes – i.e. don't rake them all up – leave some for birds to 'turn over' and find a feast.

Varied Thrush are very good at flipping leaves and it's exciting to watch them do this. For birds however, it's all in a day's work!

The Right Beak for the Job - an Experiment.



Ever tried to eat soup with a fork? No! Forks aren't meant for eating soup – spoons are. Like spoons and forks, birds' beaks are designed for different types of food. Let's try it out.

Imagine you are a hungry bird. You've found different kinds of 'food'. Use the different 'beaks' to collect food. Which is best? (Look at the back page for hints.)

Step One: you need

1. 'Beaks': clothes-pins, toothpicks, tweezers, chopsticks and pliers.
2. 'Food': sunflower seeds, cereal, gummy bears or mini marshmallows, nuts with the shell on.
3. 'Crop' (where birds store food before digesting): a small bowl.
4. Notepad and pen to track your experiment

Step 2: Dinner time!

1. Spread out the food and choose a 'beak'. For one minute pick up as much food as you can, storing it in your 'crop'.
2. Write down which 'beak' you were testing, how much and what kind of food you 'ate'.
3. Put the food back where it was; try out all beaks in turn, making notes each time.

Step 3: Results of your experiment.

Which kind of food did each type of beak pick up best? Which species of bird might use each kind of beak? Can you think why birds evolved to have different beaks?

