



First published December 3, 2017



The local bird with the most unusual bill has to be the Roseate Spoonbill.

BIG BILLS

Bills are those charges and fees we receive requesting payment for goods and services. Sometimes they can be big. Or, bills may be those ones, fives and tens we carry in our wallets or purses. Sometimes folk may even carry Ben Franklins. And, as one with a first given name of "William," I have occasionally wondered how "William" became "Bill." With a "William" father and grandfather, both known as "Bill" (and now a son, "Bill," as well), I realize I have always been referred to by my middle name in order to avoid further family confusion. But during my working career I always used all three names, first, middle, and surname, even though no one ever referred to me as William or Bill, always my middle name: "Hart." Actually, my



grandfather, who died at age 96, was known as "Billy" to the very end. And, did you know that Billy Joel's given name is William?

So, if we don't know how "William" became "Bill," can we do better figuring out why bird's "beaks" are often called "bills?" Probably not. But there is no question that some of those bird bills are truly impressive.

Some of the bird species with the most impressive bills, such as some South American hummingbird species with bills bigger than the bird itself; or some toucans with



enormous bills used for peeling and eating fruit; or some African hornbills with huge protrusions on top of huge bills, are unlike any species found in North America. Nevertheless, we do have some species with impressive bills.

Of the species with up curved bills, two of the most impressive are the American Avocet (*above left*) and the Marbled Godwit (*right*). And



while there are many species with down curved bills, from Dunlin to several species of Ibis, to Whimbrel, the clear champion in North America is the Long-billed Curlew (*left*), a western species that occurs most winters somewhere in Florida. Perhaps the most unique of all the bird's bills is the short upper, over long lower, bill combination of the Black Skimmer (*below, left*), which enables the bird to plow the water for food with its lower bill, and snap it shut on contact with the shorter upper bill when a tasty morsel is encountered.

The birds with the biggest bills though begin with the Woodstork (*below, right*) and proceed on to the two North American Pelicans, both found in Florida: the Brown and the American White (*below article*); and finish with my candidate for the biggest and most impressive: the Roseate Spoonbill. I invite you to add your impressive "big bill" suggestions to this list and I look forward to hearing from you.



Perhaps we did not solve either of the "Bill" for "William" or "bill" for "beak" riddles, but the consideration of these two questions should not result in any bills for goods or services, or require the removal of any bills from our wallets or purses. In today's world, that in itself is a good thing.



For all, and more, than you ever wanted to know about bird's beaks, see:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beak>. For a suggested difference between bills and beaks, see: <https://theboard.byu.edu/questions/75204/>. For a conclusion that the terms "beaks" and "bills" are completely interchangeable, see: <http://ornithology.com/beaks-bills/>. I found this collection of "big bill birds" after I had already made my selections: <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/15-birds-with-unbelievable-beaks>.



Click thumbnails to see larger versions