

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

# Toucans

by Guy Belleranti

Did you know there is a beautiful South American bird with an amazing colorful bill (beak) that makes up one third of its body? This bird is the toucan.

There are about 40 species of toucans. The largest, the toco toucan, is pictured on Fruit Loops cereal boxes. The toco toucan's 7½ inch long bill is the biggest of all bird bills in relation to body size.



Upon first glance you might think a toucan's bill might be a good weapon for fighting or defense. It does have a serrated edge, and its size can be intimidating. However, it's not very effective in a fight. You see, the bill is light in weight and mostly hollow. It's made of keratin, the same substance in the hair and nails of many animals including humans.

The bill's most important use is as an eating tool. The toucan uses its bill to pluck fruit and berries off branches. While primarily a fruit eater, the toucan also uses its bill to catch insects, and, occasionally, small reptiles, eggs and other birds' nestlings.

It's fun to watch how a toucan uses its bill to eat. First it grabs the food in the bill's tip. Then, with a toss of its head, the toucan throws the food into its throat. A long bristly tongue helps move the food down.

Toucans also use their bills to preen (to smooth or clean the feathers) other toucans and to toss food to one another. They use their bills in play, as well – grabbing one another's bill in a kind of "beak wrestling".

Since both males and females have brightly colored bills it may not be important to attract a mate. However, mating birds will throw fruit to one another with their bills.



Finally, the bill might be used for cooling. Recent studies suggest the bill helps a toucan shed body heat, working much like the ears of an elephant, jack rabbit or fennec fox.

While not strong flyers toucans can fly from tree to tree. However, once in the tree they hop from branch to branch. They hold on tight with the claws on their four toes.

Two of the claws go forward and two go backward, giving them a great grip.

Toucans live in small flocks and nest in tree holes. The parents take turns incubating the 2 to 4 eggs. Nestlings are born without feathers. They are blind and are fed fruit by both parents. The bill of the nestling is small, but it grows as the bird grows.

## **About the Author**

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes from his experiences working with wild animals and teaching others.

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1. A toucan's large bill is made of...
- a. bone
  - b. cartilage
  - c. the same material as a tree's bark
  - d. the same material as a human's fingernails

2. What is the largest species of toucan? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Are toucans carnivores, herbivores, or omnivores? Explain your answer.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Explain how toucan parents work together to hatch eggs and raise their young.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Where would you be most likely to see a wild toucan?
- a. in an underground burrow in a South American Rainforest
  - b. in a tree hole in a North American forest
  - c. in the treetops of an African jungle
  - d. in the trees of a South American jungle

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Match each vocabulary word from the article with the correct definition.



\_\_\_\_\_ 1. incubating

a. beak

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. intimidating

b. young bird

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. bill

c. keeping warm

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. shed

d. to let out; to remove

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. preen

e. stiff and prickly

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. bristly

f. frightening; scary

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. nestling

g. partner or companion

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. mate

h. to smooth or clean feathers

◆ Now try this: On a sheet of lined paper, use each vocabulary word from above in a sentence.

# ANSWER KEY

## Toucans

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1. A toucan's large bill is made of... **d**
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  - b. cartilage
  - c. the same material as a tree's bark
  - d. **the same material as a human's fingernails**
2. What is the largest species of toucan? **toco toucan**
3. Are toucans carnivores, herbivores, or omnivores? Explain your answer.  
**They are omnivores because they eat both plants (fruit) and other animals.**
4. Explain how toucan parents work together to hatch eggs and raise their young.  
**Both parents take turns sitting on (incubating) the egg.**  
**Both parents also feed the young bird.**
5. Where would you be most likely to see a wild toucan? **d**
  - a. in an underground burrow in a South American Rainforest
  - b. in a tree hole in a North American forest
  - c. in the treetops of an African jungle
  - d. **in the trees of a South American jungle**

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