

First evidence found of tool use by seabirds

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Three researchers from the University of Oxford and the South Iceland Nature Research Centre have found evidence of tool use by puffins—the first evidence of tool use by any seabird. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Annette Fayet, Erpur

Snær Hansen and Dora Biro describe their evidence of puffins using sticks to scratch a part of their body.

Over the past several decades, researchers have found many examples of non-human primates using tools—several types of passerine [birds](#) have been found to use tools, as well. Crows have been observed using sticks for many purposes, and parrots have been seen breaking seashells with rocks. But until now, no instances of [tool](#) use by seabirds have been observed. Because of their relatively small brains, many in the field believed they simply did not have the capacity to make use of a tool. But the researchers in this new effort have disproven these beliefs.

The researchers report that one member of their group witnessed a puffin grabbing and using a stick to [scratch](#) its back as it bobbed on the water four years ago. But because she did not have a camera with her, she was not able to capture evidence of the tool use in action. Much more recently, the researchers were able to video-record a [puffin](#) grabbing a small stick and using it to scratch its underside. Besides representing the first known use of a tool by a seabird, it is also the first-ever observation of a bird of any kind using a tool to scratch itself.

The researchers note that the bird in their recording lived on Grimsey Island in Iceland, where birds suffer from parasites in their plumage. They further note that last year was known to be a particularly bad year for tick infestations. They suggest using a sharp stick might have been more effective at removing the pests than beaks. They also note that because they witnessed tool use in two locations separated by a wide distance, it appears likely that tool use among puffins is common.

More information: A.L. Fayet, E.S. Hansen and D. Biro. Evidence of tool use in a seabird. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Published online December 30, 2019. [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1918060117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1918060117)

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