

'Feather Frame'

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The odd bill: The Indian Skimmer (*Rynchops albicollis*) is one of the three species of skimmers found worldwide, the only skimmer sp. in India, and it possesses a bill like no other avian in our country. It has a short upper mandible and a longer lower mandible. This is not a drawback; rather, having a longer lower mandible actually helps in the way it feeds. Skimmers catch their prey by flying low over the water surface, with the mouth open, upper mandible raised and the lower one immersed in the water (which is called 'skimming'). When it strikes prey, the head bends under the body, cushioning the shock and the jaws snap shut. It draws the prey out of the water while the head is still back or down. This happens very quickly. The prey is then swallowed mid-air or after the bird alights. One can witness skimmers skimming in Jamnagar, usually in September - November.

Skimmers usually prefer to feed in shallow water bodies with favourable concentration of prey. They cut the water in a straight path, flying individually or sometimes in loose groups. They get attracted to disturbances on the surface of water caused by the fish. This type of foraging is helpful to feed even at night. The action of skimming over the water surface also

causes a great deal of wear and tear to the tip of the lower mandible. Sometimes, this tip breaks when it hits an object like a stone or some hard obstacle. Breakage and abrasion to the tip of the lower mandible (called 'rhamphotheca') actually helps in controlling the rapidly growing lower mandible. Interestingly, the lower mandible grows continuously, like our finger nails, and helps to compensate for the wear and tear incurred during skimming. □



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