

Toolmaking

One of the things that occasionally fascinates me is how we define ourselves as human by defining other animals as somehow, well, inferior. And one of the areas that we've traditionally done that til recently is defining ourselves as the only toolmakers. Now anyone who's ever looked at an empty snail shell with a hole in the side without going "wow, I never knew they had escape hatches" automatically knows that isn't true. But how untrue? Once more to the literature boys...

Several books and articles (e.g. this [1940s article](#) by Kenneth Oakley) on man the toolmaker take toolmaking as a given; these works move straight to which tools for what purpose, and skip the reasons and methods by which we might have become toolmakers at all. There's a species of early man, [homo habilis](#) ("able man" or sometimes "man the toolmaker") named after its toolmaking skills, mainly for an ability, 2.6 million years ago, to create and use a [cutting edge](#) on a small stone.

I'll probably come back to people later, as toolmaking appears to be bound up with creativity, definition and even religion. For now, I'll concentrate on the animals, as a useful control group. So, the ones that I know of are:

- [Thrushes using stones](#) to break open snails (maybe they needed that escape hatch after all).
- [Chimpanzees using sticks](#) to extract honey.
- [Sea otters](#) using rocks to break open shellfish.
- [Galapagos finches](#) using spines to pick grubs out of treebark.

And lots more behaviours being observed in [labs](#). There are even [behavioural ecology](#) groups out there studying this. In the end, this is really a non-post because the arguments are all there, the evidence is known, including that animals will use whatever materials are to hand (or claw or beak) for the tasks that they have, and that well-fed, well-cared-for captive animals have more time and inclination (even with adjustments for other factors) to be creative; the questions really are only of degree. And that's before we talk about [elephants](#) and [primates](#) painting.

And then there is the use of animals as tools by humans. Which is a whole different subject, and not one for today. Suffice to say that the [Mk 7 Dolphin](#) does exist, and even has [patents](#) attached.