

How the Canada Jay lost its name and why it matters

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Introduction

In 1957, with the publication of its fifth “Check-list of the Birds of North America”, the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU) did away with “Canada Jay”, the name it had used for *Perisoreus canadensis* until 1910, and for the nominate subspecies, *P. c. canadensis*, during the subsequent 47 years. English names were discontinued for all subspecies in Check-list 5 (AOU 1957) and, in the case of *P. canadensis*, a new English species name was declared, namely “Gray Jay”. The taxonomic and nomenclatural decisions of the AOU are held in such respect that North American journal editors, ornithologists and birders almost always accept them and assume that they are invariably made for compelling biological reasons. Gray Jay researchers such as Ryan Norris of the University of Guelph and I are good examples because, although we have studied the ecology and behaviour of Gray Jays for a combined total of over 60 years, and have always called them by that name, we never once

questioned why the original name, “Canada Jay”, was deemed inappropriate.

This would still be the case were it not for the Royal Canadian Geographical Society’s (RCGS) well-publicized 2015-16 campaign to choose a national bird for Canada (Anon. 2015). While both of us supported the Gray Jay nomination, we felt the name, with its American spelling of “gray” instead of the Canadian “grey” was inappropriate for a Canadian national symbol. We noted that the RCGS had presented *P. canadensis* in their campaign as “Gray Jay/Whiskeyjack”, thus acknowledging the country-wide use of the colloquial name derived from the Cree *Wisakedjak* that entered English as “Whisker-jack” as early as 1740 (Gosselin 2017). However, we lamented that they had not also included “Canada Jay”, the original official name. After all, it, too, clearly had unassailable historical legitimacy and was obviously appropriate as the name for a Canadian national bird. We also thought, if the RCGS had



A colour-banded population of *P. canadensis* has been under continuous study in Ontario's Algonquin Provincial Park since the 1960s. *Photo by Dan Strickland*

chosen to present *P. canadensis* under its original official English name, it would have received much more support than it actually did (it finished third in the “popular vote” behind the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) and the Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*)). Thus, when, at the end of the campaign, the RCGS nevertheless chose the Gray Jay as its choice to be Canada's national bird (Walker 2016), we took it as self-evident there would have been more public acceptance if the choice had been announced as the “Canada Jay”.

It was in this context that we found ourselves increasingly asked by the public

and media why the AOU had abandoned the historic name, “Canada Jay”, back in 1957. Personal circumstances allowed me to attempt finding an answer to this question and I report my findings here.

Methods

Consultation

I first contacted several of the present members of the AOU's Nomenclature and Classification Committee (NACC) to determine whether any of them knew the thinking behind the imposition of “Gray Jay”. I then consulted relevant popular and academic literature from the

1940s and 1950s, the official history of the AOU (Sterling and Ainley 2016) and another, unofficial history of American ornithology (Barrow 1998). Finally, in April and August of 2016, I examined the AOU's archives housed in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Analysis

After finding serious contemporary criticism of the AOU's pre-1957 vernacular naming system, I converted Check-list 4 (AOU 1931) to a spreadsheet format to facilitate a more quantitative evaluation of its problems. In particular, I asked to what extent the vernacular naming system mirrored the Latin system which permits, even for someone with no ornithological knowledge, the certain identification of a bird at both the species level (binomial name structure, e.g., *Larus argentatus*) and the subspecies level (trinomial name structure in which the binomial species name is embedded, e.g. *Larus argentatus smithsonicus*). I more loosely defined an English "binomial" as consisting of a single-word category name (e.g., Sparrow, Quail-dove) modified by a specific "qualifier" that usually consisted of one word (e.g., "Fox" [Sparrow]) but which might also be a two-word geographic reference (e.g., "Key West" [Quail-dove]). English "trinomials" (i.e., subspecies) correspondingly consisted of a binomial modified by a subspecific qualifier that could also consist of one or more words (e.g., Warner Mountains [Fox Sparrow]).

Results

General

None of the present members of the NACC that I consulted had any knowledge of the choice of "Gray Jay" in 1957, and the official and unofficial ornithological histories I consulted were disappointingly silent about the deficiencies of the English nomenclatural system used before 1957. Most of the insights offered in this paper came from a few key published articles from the 1940s, the AOU's own published Check-lists and Supplements and unpublished archival material from the 1940s and 1950s. The latter (excerpts cited here in italics within quotation marks) was contained in Smithsonian Institution Archives Record RU7150, Boxes 3 to 7, 38, 39, 43 to 49 and 58. I have retained photocopies of all the original archival material cited here and they are available upon request.

History of the names "Canada Jay" and "Gray Jay"

"Canada Jay" was used as the species' English name for *P. canadensis* at least as early as Swainson and Richardson (1831) and Audubon (1840-44). It was also so used by the AOU (Table 1) in its Check-lists 1 and 2 (AOU 1886, 1895) but "demoted" to meaning merely the nominate subspecies, *P. c. canadensis* in Check-lists 3 and 4 (AOU 1910, 1931) before its failure to reappear in the Check-list 5 (AOU 1957).

"Gray Jay" was first used by Robert Ridgway (1899) of the Smithsonian Institution as the English name for a new subspecies (*Perisoreus obscurus griseus*) of the "Oregon Jay", *Perisoreus obscurus* which, at the time, was deemed to be a different



Mated pairs of *P. canadensis* occupy large permanent territories in Canada's boreal and subalpine forests.
Photo by Dan Strickland

species, separate from *P. canadensis*. As with “Canada Jay”, the specific name “Oregon Jay” was downgraded in the 1910 and 1931 Check-lists to mean merely the nominate subspecies (i.e., *P. o. obscurus*). The names “Gray Jay” and “Oregon Jay” continued to be the English designations for the two subspecies of *P. obscurus* up until 1944 when the AOU lumped *P. obscurus* with *P. canadensis*. This lumping had no effect on the AOU's meaning of “Canada Jay” which designated a subspecies of *P. canadensis* before the lump and designated exactly the same after the lump. For the next 13 years, right up until publication of Check-list 5, the Canada Jay, the Gray Jay, the Oregon Jay and several other named taxa coexisted as mere subspecies of *P. canadensis*.

The AOU's conventions of vernacular nomenclature 1910-1957

The AOU's failure to provide overall English species names for the two *Perisoreus* species in its 1910 and 1931 Check-lists was in no way unique. For all monotypic species (i.e., species with no subspecies; 389 of 798 species on the 1931 list; 49% of the total), the AOU provided both Latin binomials and English names but for the 409 polytypic species (i.e., species with at least two subspecies; 51% of the total) such as *P. canadensis*, it gave neither. Instead, it presented Latin trinomials and English vernacular names for each of the 1020 subspecies comprising the polytypic species.



P. canadensis is quick to take advantage of novel sources of food that can supplement its winter food stores. Photo by Gord Belyea

Table 1. History of AOU's nomenclatural treatment of "Canada Jay" and "Gray Jay"

Check-lists 1 and 2 (AOU 1886, 1895)	Check-lists 3 and 4 (AOU 1910, 1931)
<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i> Canada Jay	(No species-level scientific name) (No species-level common name)
(NO NOMINATE SUBSPECIES) (NO NOMINATE SUBSPECIES)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis canadensis</i> Canada Jay
<i>Perisoreus canadensis capitalis</i> Rocky Mountain Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis capitalis</i> Rocky Mountain Jay
<i>Perisoreus canadensis fumifrons</i> Alaskan Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis fumifrons</i> Alaska Jay
<i>Perisoreus canadensis nigricapillus</i> Labrador Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis nigricapillus</i> Labrador Jay (not on the 1931 list)
<i>Perisoreus obscurus</i> Oregon Jay	(No species-level scientific name) (No species-level common name)
	<i>Perisoreus obscurus obscurus</i> Oregon Jay
	<i>Perisoreus obscurus griseus</i> Gray Jay

The ultimate Canadian bird? A female incubating in a late winter snowstorm. Her three eggs hatched a few days later. Photo by Dan Strickland



1931 List modified by Supplements 19, 20, 24 and 27 (AOU 1944, 1945, 1949, 1952)	Proposed for Check-list 5 1947-48	Check-list 5 (AOU 1957)
(No species-level scientific name) (No species-level common name)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i> Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i> Gray Jay
<i>Perisoreus canadensis canadensis</i> → Canada Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis canadensis</i> Canada Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis canadensis</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis capitalis</i> Rocky Mountain Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis capitalis</i> Rocky Mountain Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis capitalis</i>
<i>P. c. fumifrons</i> → <i>pacificus</i> (1952) ¹ Alaska Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis fumifrons</i> Alaska Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis pacificus</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis nigricapillus</i> Labrador Jay (restored to list 1944)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis nigricapillus</i> Labrador Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis nigricapillus</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis albescens</i> Alberta Jay (1944)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis albescens</i> Alberta Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis albescens</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis obscurus</i> Oregon Jay (1944)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis obscurus</i> Oregon Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis obscurus</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis griseus</i> → Gray Jay (1944)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis griseus</i> Ridgway's (Cascades) Gray Jay ⁵	<i>Perisoreus canadensis griseus</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis bicolor</i> Idaho Jay (1944)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis bicolor</i> Idaho Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis bicolor</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis barbouri</i> Anticosti Jay (1944)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis barbouri</i> Anticosti Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis barbouri</i>
<i>P. c. pacificus</i> → <i>arcus</i> (1952) ^{2,3} Pacific Canada Jay (1945)	<i>Perisoreus canadensis pacificus</i> Pacific Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis arcus</i>
<i>Perisoreus canadensis sanfordi</i> Newfoundland Gray Jay (1949) ⁴		<i>Perisoreus canadensis sanfordi</i>

¹ *P. c. fumifrons* became *P. c. pacificus* with the 27th Supplement (AOU 1952) because of a naming priority issue.

² *P. c. pacificus* named in the 20th Supplement (AOU 1945) was renamed *P. c. arcus* in the 27th Supplement (AOU 1952) because *P. c. pacificus* was preoccupied (see above).

³ Note that when *P. c. pacificus* was proposed in 1945, it received the English subspecies name Pacific Canada Jay, clearly implying that the presumptive English species name was "Canada Jay" (see text).

⁴ When *P. c. sanfordi* was proposed in the 14th Supplement (AOU 1949) it was given the English name "Newfoundland Gray Jay", thus signalling the AOU's otherwise unannounced intention to elevate "Gray Jay" to the status of overall English species name (see text).

⁵ To avoid having a subspecies with the English name "Gray Gray Jay", it was first proposed that *P. c. griseus* be renamed "Ridgway's Gray Jay". This was later changed to "Cascades Gray Jay".

This vernacular naming system had several serious drawbacks including:

1. It was impossible to determine, from the English name alone, whether the name referred to a species or to a subspecies. Latin species names are invariably binomials and subspecies names are trinomials but the English names on Check-list 4, whether of species or subspecies, could be trinomials, binomials, or even “uninomials”. For example, 26 English uninomials (e.g., Ovenbird, Bobolink) on the 1931 list referred to monotypic species and 12 were the names of subspecies (e.g., Osprey, Whimbrel). Similarly, 338 binomials were the names of species (all monotypic, e.g., Western Meadowlark, Canada Warbler) and 659 (66%) referred to subspecies (e.g., Eastern Meadowlark, Nashville Warbler). Of 374 trinomials 349 (93%) referred to subspecies (e.g. Gray-crowned Rosy Finch, American Three-toed Woodpecker) but 25 referred to monotypic species (e.g., Cassin’s Purple Finch, McKay’s Snow Bunting), and it was impossible to realize this from their name structures alone.
2. A further deficiency of the English trinomials on the 1931 list was that the binomials they contained did not always refer to the same species. Of 100 different binomials contained within English trinomials, nine referred to two different species. For example, the California Clapper Rail and the Yuma Clapper Rail were races of *Rallus obsoletus*, while four other “Clapper Rails” on the 1931 Check-list were races of *Rallus longirostris*.

3. The failure of Check-list 4 to give overall species names for the 409 polytypic species it contained was trivial for Latin names since the provided trinomial subspecies names always included the binomial species names as their first two elements (genus and species). On the vernacular side, however, there were only 91 polytypic species (22% of the total) whose subspecies all had English trinomial names containing a possible overall English name for the species (e.g., the three then-recognized races of *Canachites canadensis*; Hudsonian Spruce Grouse, Canada Spruce Grouse, and Alaska Spruce Grouse). A further 19 species (5%) had at least some subspecies with similarly helpful English names (e.g., the races of *Branta canadensis* on the 1931 list were: Common Canada Goose, White-cheeked Canada Goose and Lesser Canada Goose, as well as the uninformative Hutchin’s Goose and Cackling Goose).

This left 299 species (73% of polytypic species and 37% of the entire 1931 list) that had neither an overall English species name or even a single subspecies with a trinomial name containing a binomial that could be construed as a species name. It was, therefore, literally impossible to refer to any of these species with an AOU-sanctioned overall English name for the 47 years from 1910 to 1957. *P. canadensis* was one of those species.

I found two approaches to writing about *P. canadensis* that were taken by authors of the day. Bent (1946) followed the AOU’s lead and made no mention of the species at all, writing separately instead about several of its subspecies,

including the Canada Jay (*P. c. canadensis*) and the Gray Jay (*P. c. griseus*). In contrast, Roger Tory Peterson broke from AOU orthodoxy by using “Canada Jay” in both his eastern and western field guides (Peterson 1941, 1947) to mean both the nominate subspecies, *P. canadensis canadensis*, and the overall species, *P. canadensis*. He similarly used “Oregon Jay” in his western guide to mean both the overall species, *P. obscurus*, and its nominate subspecies (Peterson 1941).

Pressure on the AOU to reform its naming systems

Complaints about the AOU’s vernacular naming system and appeals for its overhaul came from several quarters in the 1940s. In their popular bird identification field guides, both Peterson (1941, 1947) and Pough (1946) addressed the confusion surrounding vernacular nomenclature and both corresponded with Alexander Wetmore, chairman of the AOU’s NACC, urging reforms. In appendices on “Subspecies”, Peterson used the “Steller’s Jay” in his western guide (Peterson 1941) and later the “Canada Jay” in his eastern guide (Peterson 1947) as examples to illustrate his frustration with the lack of overall English species names for polytypic species and the impossibility of knowing from their vernacular names to which species many subspecies belonged. He also lauded the introduction of a rational naming system by Alden H. Miller in “The Distribution of the Birds of California” (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Miller’s approach was to imitate the scientific naming system by using English trinomials for all subspecies and having the



"Canada Jay" was the AOU's official name for *Perisoreus canadensis* on its first two Check-lists (1886 and 1895). Photo by Dan Strickland

species name nested within the trinomial. Thus, for *P. canadensis*, Miller restored the original overall species name, “Canada Jay” and for the two alleged races occurring in California (referred to by the AOU as the “Oregon Jay” [*P. c. obscurus*] and the “Gray Jay” [*P. c. griseus*]), he used “Southwestern Canada Jay” and “Gray Canada Jay”, respectively.

Further important pressure for reform came from a *Wilson Bulletin* paper whose lead author was Eugene Eisenmann, president of New York’s influential Linnaean Society (Eisenmann and Poor 1946). In it, the authors set out the problems of the existing vernacular nomenclatural system and proposed that two main principles should guide its reform, namely:

“1. Every species should have a name, applicable only to that species, which can be used in a comprehensive manner for all races of the species...” and

“2. Every subspecies name should be formed by prefixing to the species name a word or words indicating the race.”

They also stated that “*it is certainly desirable to retain many established names regardless of whether or not they are appropriate...*” but urged the observance of additional naming principles when a new name had to be found. One of these was that “*a species name should not be formed from the name of a geographical or political subdivision*”, the reason being that this could lead to geographically awkward subspecies names.

The AOU's response to the calls for reform

The AOU, in general, was apparently sympathetic to the reformers' wishes. In a 1939 memorandum entitled “*Recommendations of the A.O.U. to its Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of North American Birds*”, the AOU specifically recommended that “*editions of the Checklist should appear every 10 years*” and that (in the next edition) “*there be a scientific name, a vernacular name, and a statement of range for each species as a whole, ...*”. They also added the suggestion that “*vernacular names for subspecies are unnecessary.*”

Notwithstanding this clear direction, the minutes of a subsequent Check-list Committee meeting held in Boston on 10 September 1940 recorded that: “*A suggestion by A.H. Miller in a letter regarding abandoning subspecific vernacular names was unanimously voted down. All present felt it was necessary and desirable to continue common names for subspecies.*” The same minutes also noted “*The suggestion that each subspecific vernacular name include the vernacular name of the species (ex. Louisiana Carolina Paroquet) was voted down.*”

Wetmore eventually yielded to the pressure by agreeing to support a radical overhaul of vernacular names following the principles advocated by Eisenmann and Poor (1946) in anticipation of the next (5th) AOU Check-list. His archived correspondence records his appreciation for the leading role played by W.L. McAtee of Chicago in preparing two exhaustive lists of proposed new vernacular species and subspecies names. The first, covering non-passerines, was presented at meetings of the Check-list Committee held in Toronto in September 1947 and the second, covering passerines, was circulated by mail in June 1948 in anticipation of a fall meeting in Omaha later that year. Wetmore graciously acknowledged that the proposed names he was then circulating closely followed the principles (that he had previously resisted) advocated by Eisenmann and Poor (1946) and, before them, by Grinnell and Miller (1944). Still, even then, Wetmore had serious misgivings about the new scheme. In the preface to the 1947 list, he remarked: “*Whether this demand (i.e., for overall species names and for subspecies names that contain those species names) is genuine and necessary, or whether it is based on the idea of a few vocal individuals has been difficult for your Chairman to determine.*” A few lines later, he wrote, “*The list as presented shows some of the benefits as well as the various horrors of such a plan.*”

The new overall vernacular species name (Gray Jay) and reformed subspecies names for *P. canadensis* that were proposed in 1948 for inclusion in Check-list 5 are shown in Table 1. These proposed names (and those of all other species on



The confiding Whiskeyjack is beloved by Canadians from coast to coast. *Photo by Gord Belyea.*

the 1947 and 1948 lists) were initially circulated to Check-list Committee members for their comments. Proposed draft accounts as they would appear in Check-list 5 were then drawn up and circulated to at least 40 North American ornithologists including four based in Canada (I. McTaggart Cowan and J.A. Munro in British Columbia, W. Earl Godfrey at the National Museum in Ottawa and L.L. Snyder at the Royal Ontario Museum). The only comment returned to Wetmore expressing reticence concerning the choice of “Gray Jay” as the overall species name for *P. canadensis* was a hand-written marginal notation on Snyder’s copy saying: *“Whiskeyjack’ is used universally in the north (& will continue to be). Its use with names of political areas (such as Idaho) would avoid awkward term and avoid a new coinage.”*

Snyder did not express an opinion about “Canada Jay” but his comment indicates he recognized a need to avoid geographic awkwardness. While I found no other discussion of the subject, I believe the AOU’s decision to choose “Gray Jay” as the overall species name rather than restoring “Canada Jay” is indeed most plausibly attributed to that concern. Since the new vernacular scheme required that the overall species name be included in all vernacular subspecies names, the choice of “Canada Jay” as the species name would have resulted in geographically awkward subspecies names such as “Alaska Canada Jay”, “Oregon Canada Jay”, and “Idaho Canada Jay”. Even “Labrador Canada Jay” would have been less than ideal since, in the late 1940s, Labrador’s borders and status were still contested and Newfoundland had not yet joined Canada. Previous proponents of a rationalized vernacular nomenclatural

system had cautioned against names that gave rise to geographical absurdities such as “California Florida Jay” (Eisenmann and Poor 1946) or “Florida Carolina Wren” (Peterson 1947) and I suggest that this concern also motivated the AOU’s rejection of “Canada Jay” and preference for “Gray Jay” instead.

I further suggest, incidentally, that “Canada Goose” was not likewise rejected as a restored overall vernacular species name for *Branta canadensis* because none of its English subspecies names (listed above) contained geographic qualifiers that would have led to similar difficulties. “Canada Warbler” (the only other vernacular name on the 1931 Check-list that included “Canada”) was not affected by the proposed nomenclatural reforms since it already referred to a (monotypic) species, *Wilsonia canadensis*, not to a subspecies.

The dénouement

Minutes of the 7 September 1947 Committee meeting in Toronto record that those present were specifically enjoined to keep the new scheme and the list of names secret since “to publicize the matter now would lead to much useless and burdensome correspondence”. As far as I am aware, the AOU made no public announcement of the impending changes in nomenclature, let alone on the specific case of *P. canadensis*, before the actual publication of the Check-list’s fifth edition in 1957, a year in which its journal, the *Auk*, even published a note that still used “Canada Jay” (Lawrence 1957). Nevertheless, clues were available well before 1957 that nomenclatural changes were afoot. In 1945, the AOU

announced the alleged existence of a new subspecies *P. c. pacificus* (later *P. c. arcus*; see footnote #2 in Table 1) for which it gave the English name “Pacific Canada Jay” (AOU 1945). Four years later, however, the AOU accepted another subspecies, *P. c. sanfordi*, this time with the English name of “Newfoundland Gray Jay” (AOU 1949), hinting at a switch in allegiance from “Canada Jay” to “Gray Jay” as an implied overall vernacular species name. Reference by the AOU to an east-coast race as a “Gray Jay” should have raised eyebrows since, at the time, that name still officially designated only *P. c. griseus*, a race of the far west (Cascades and B.C. coastal mountains). An even stronger clue that a new order was imminent came with the publication of “Birds of Washington State” (Jewett *et al.* 1953). The authors (two of whom, Jewett and Aldrich, were among the 40 receiving advance copies of the draft Check-list 5) explicitly gave “Gray Jay” as an overall species name for *P. canadensis* (something that, according to the AOU, had ceased to exist after Check-list 3 replaced Check-list 2). They also gave “Oregon Gray Jay” for *P. c. obscurus*, and “Cascade Gray Jay” for *P. c. griseus*.

To my knowledge, this was the first and only time that any of the new vernacular names for the subspecies *P. canadensis* proposed in 1948 (Table 1) were ever published. The original plan to present the entire freshly overhauled vernacular naming system in the Check-list’s fifth edition came to a dead-stop at a September 1954 meeting of the renamed “Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of North American Birds” held in Madison, WI. Discussion of the

“controversial” subject of common names stretched over two days, during which more and more of the committee expressed waning enthusiasm for retaining common names for subspecies.

The minutes, possibly betraying a certain 11th hour exasperation, end with: *“Amadon expressed as his opinion, that those who believe common names will be missed by amateurs are laboring under a delusion. Van Tyne believed that we should assume leadership rather than merely go along with the desires of what may be a minority. Both Lincoln and Miller commented on the time spent in past meetings in our efforts to decide on suitable names while Wetmore referred to the confusion that will be caused by designating some species by a name that was formerly confined to a subspecies. To bring the question to a head Miller moved for the deletion of sub-specific common names. This was seconded by Friedmann, and carried with one dissenting vote.”*

Recall that in 1940, the same (Alden H.) Miller had urged exactly the same thing (abandonment of subspecific vernacular names) but was turned down unanimously by the then committee (of which three members, including Wetmore, were still members in 1954). In the space of 14 years, the committee had gone from strongly favouring a system in which only subspecies had common names to the exact opposite (only species were to have common names).

This complete reversal of naming philosophy had an important implication. I argue that the motivation for elevating “Gray Jay” from obscurity instead of restoring “Canada Jay” to its original status as the long-standing overall species

name was to avoid geographical awkwardness in the reformed English subspecies names. But this justification for choosing “Gray Jay” instead of restoring the original “Canada Jay” as the overall species name evaporated with the decision not to have vernacular subspecies names. There could be no awkwardness in subspecies names after the 1954 decision because there were simply not going to be any subspecies names.

The committee also recognized this and the minutes of their annual meeting a year later (24 October 1955, Cambridge, MA) included the following agenda item and comment: *“Common names to be used in the Fifth Edition. Decision to abandon subspecific vernacular names, makes it possible to retain as specific names a number that have been long in use.”*

I found no further discussion of possible abandonments of the new names proposed in 1947-48 but I did discover 18 cases where the names actually published in 1957 (Check-list 5) were not the proposed names, but reversions to the real or implied names on Check-list 4 (AOU 1931). Examples of ultimately rejected proposed names include “Chestnut-backed Bluebird”, “Pileolated Warbler”, “Grass Wren” and “Chestnut-crowned Warbler”. They reverted to, respectively, “Western Bluebird”, “Wilson’s Warbler”, “Short-billed Marsh Wren” and “Nashville Warbler”. There is no reason apparent to me why the proposed “Gray Jay” could not have similarly reverted to the original “Canada Jay”.

Discussion

One early hypothesis to explain the AOU's 1957 imposition of "Gray Jay" was that it resulted from the lumping of *P. canadensis* and *P. obscurus*. This was superficially plausible because the two species were widely believed to have the English names, "Canada Jay", and "Oregon Jay" and the AOU later adopted a guideline (AOU 1983), suggesting that, when two taxa with different English names are lumped, a new name should be found for the merged taxon. But the hypothesis is false because, as summarized in Table 1, the two species, *P. canadensis* and *P. obscurus*, did *not* have English names during the period (1910-1957) when they were lumped (1944). As for "Canada Jay", "Oregon Jay", and "Gray Jay", those names referred, not to species, but to subspecies. Contrary to widespread perception, therefore, the Canada Jay and the Oregon Jay (both just subspecies) were not lumped in 1944 and the name "Gray Jay" did not come into existence at that time. All three names designated subspecies before the 1944 lumping of their "parent" species and they continued as such for another 13 years afterwards. Indeed, the only real nomenclatural effect of the 1944 event was that the scientific names of the Oregon Jay and the Gray Jay changed, respectively, from *P. obscurus obscurus* to *P. canadensis obscurus* and from *P. obscurus griseus* to *P. canadensis griseus*.

There is no doubt, however, that in 1957, the AOU chose the name "Gray Jay" to designate the overall species, *P. canadensis*, and the question is why it did not follow the more obvious course of restoring the much older and well

established "Canada Jay" instead. The AOU archival material and the contemporary literature I have examined indicate that the decision not to restore "Canada Jay" resulted from an honest attempt to reform the previously chaotic vernacular naming system and in particular to avoid geographic awkwardness in the common names of subspecies. But this possible reason for abandoning "Canada Jay" and imposing "Gray Jay" in its place abruptly disappeared when, in 1954, the AOU gave up on the whole idea of vernacular subspecies names.

I would argue further that, even if the AOU had decided to retain vernacular subspecies names in Check-list 5 (AOU 1957), there would still be grounds to challenge its decision to abandon "Canada Jay". The original stricture of Eisenmann and Poor (1946) to avoid geographic qualifiers in species names was specifically intended to apply to *new* species names and not to result in the abandonment of traditional, well-established names. Moreover, there are two ways, not just one, to avoid awkwardness when geographic subspecific and specific qualifiers clash in the bosom of single trinomial (e.g., "Alaska Canada Jay"). The way chosen in the AOU's still-born proposals of 1947 and 1948 was to abandon the older specific qualifier ("Canada") and keep the often much younger subspecific qualifiers (e.g., "Idaho, Oregon, Newfoundland", etc.). But the AOU could just as easily have chosen to keep "Canada" and abandon the subspecific qualifiers, as Miller did in his pioneering attempts to reform the AOU's nomenclatural system (Grinnell and Miller 1944). Faced with the two California

perisoreus subspecies, Gray Jay and Oregon Jay, Miller “trinomialized” their names as the “Cascade Canada Jay” and the “Southwestern Canada Jay”, in the latter case avoiding the geographic awkwardness of what otherwise would have been the “Oregon Canada Jay”.

Overall, I conclude that there was no valid taxonomic or nomenclatural reason for the AOU to impose “Gray Jay” as the overall English species name in 1957 or to refrain from restoring the original and historically far more authentic “Canada Jay”. Further, while the history of the Canada Jay/Gray Jay name change may be of particular interest to ornithologists, I suggest it should matter to the wider community as well. At the present time, just before Canada’s 150th birthday, the federal government may be considering whether to endorse the Royal Canadian Geographical Society’s choice of *P. canadensis* as our national bird. Of course, as a sovereign nation, Canada does not need to seek approval from any outside body for its decisions on what to call its national symbols. It has even less reason to ask for permission to restore the original official English name—and least of all from the unelected foreign-dominated body that, through error, caused the name to be “lost” in the first place. But, given the traditional automatic acceptance of the AOU’s taxonomic and nomenclatural decisions, the federal government might well assume that “Canada Jay” was abandoned in 1957 for sound biological reasons that it dare not contravene.

On the contrary, since the facts related here show otherwise, if the Canadian Government should now see fit to

endorse the Royal Canadian Geographical Society’s choice of *P. canadensis* as Canada’s national bird, it will be innocent of any biological or nomenclatural heresy and perfectly within its rights should it, at the same time, declare the name of our new national symbol to be, once again, “Canada Jay”.

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