

THE SPELLING OF COMMON NAMES OF BIRDS

BY WILLIAM H. CHEESMAN AND PAUL H. OEHSER

THE still-uncompleted work of providing correct scientific names for the birds of North America has been a task requiring such close attention that taxonomists and special committees may be excused for neglecting to develop a standard and authoritative orthography for the common names. Lack of system in this matter, however, has long been an annoyance if not a serious handicap to all who have had anything to do with publications in which the common names of birds are used, whether they be research workers, compilers, popular writers, editors or proofreaders.

The present writers, as editors in different scientific branches of the Federal Government that issue publications on birds,—one in the Bureau of Biological Survey, the other in the United States National Museum,—find it difficult to be consistently uniform in spelling the common names of birds without memorizing arbitrarily set forms or endlessly consulting reference works. Two difficulties are at once confronted: (1) if the present A. O. U. Check-list is followed as authority, the inconsistencies therein are perpetuated; and (2) if the dictionary is followed it is found that the inconsistencies there are as glaring as those in the Check-list.

The independent writer is free to disregard both the Check-list and the dictionary if he so desires, but not so the Government editor because uniformity is desired in the spelling of common names of birds in Government publications, not only those of the Biological Survey and the National Museum but also those of the National Park Service, the National Zoological Park, the Forest Service, the Soil Conservation Service and the Bureau of Animal Industry. Among others that make occasional use of these names are: the State Department (in treaties), the Treasury Department (in customs regulations), the Federal Archives and the Department of Justice (in regulations enforcing bird-protective laws), the Bureau of American Ethnology (in miscellaneous Americana) and the Office of Education (in handbooks for teachers and others). No one of these could insist that the Public Printer follow its individual preference or even the A. O. U. Check-list so long as the dictionary (Webster) is followed for the sake of uniformity throughout the Government service. Under authority of law the Public Printer has directed that all writers and editors in the various departments and independent establishments be governed by 'Webster's Dictionary,' unless an exception has been made and published in the 'Style Manual' of the Government Printing Office.

The result is that in Government publications bird names frequently are not spelled in the same way as they are in 'The Auk' and in other orni-

thological journals. On suitable recommendation, however, the Public Printer may list in the 'Style Manual' a standard other than the dictionary in exceptional cases. He has done so in the case of 'Standardized Plant Names,' having incorporated a long list of plant common names spelled as approved by a committee of botanists who had made a study in that field and proposed changes in the interest of uniformity.

Before similar recommendations are made in the case of bird names, it is desirable that some housecleaning be done with the names as they now appear in the A. O. U. Check-list, for even a cursory examination will demonstrate the need of a little dressing up for public inspection. Otherwise one list is as good as any other. The present writers, therefore, have welcomed the opportunity afforded by Dr. Alexander Wetmore to make a study of these names and report thereon to the A. O. U. Committee on Classification and Nomenclature, of which he is chairman. On Dr. Wetmore's invitation for the writers to serve as a subcommittee of his committee, they have reviewed the bird names as they now appear in the fourth edition of the Check-list (unabridged, 1931; abridged, 1935) and, without recommending any change of name, have suggested orthographic changes in the interests of analogy and logic, and thus of uniformity. They trust that their effort will prove helpful when revision is begun on the fifth edition of the Check-list and that in the interim their suggestions may be found acceptable to individual writers and to dictionary editors.

This paper constitutes the report of the subcommittee and was submitted to the editor of 'The Auk' with Dr. Wetmore's consent in order that the suggestions might be widely known, and thus find ready acceptance in the Check-list. It is hoped that the orthography recommended may provide a short cut for writers and others who otherwise must depend on memory or on reference lists in following either of the present standards, which are not consistent in the use of the hyphen, double letters, the suffix 'ed' in the adjective part of a name, single-word form for misnomers and several other particulars. Because the use of the hyphen is especially puzzling, Dr. T. S. Palmer once suggested to the senior author that he prepare an article on this general subject under the title 'Hang the Hyphen'! This paper, therefore, may serve the double purpose of accepting the invitations of both of these ornithologists.

Before listing the changes proposed, it will be well to outline the principles that have governed the subcommittee in recommending a standard for uniformity and facility in spelling the names of birds. Though these principles have been formulated with special reference to North American birds, there is no reason why they cannot apply as well to the English common names of all birds.

There is a proper use of the hyphen, particularly in many compound-

adjective modifiers ending in 'ed.' In many other compounds formerly hyphenated, usage tends to consider their evolution as completed and the single-word form acceptable. This trend seems to be in the right direction, and it is only surprising that the hyphen should persist as it does, particularly since it is omitted by many ornithological writers and in many analogous cases in the Check-list. The hyphen is useful in the period of transition during which writers and readers are becoming familiar with two words written as one to express a unit idea. The tendency toward one word for two or more short ones cannot be objected to, even though the result may break up an index somewhat, as when *goshawk*¹ is not found among the hawks, *goldfinch* among the finches, or *skylark* among the larks. In general, the single word is to be preferred to the hyphenated, and the hyphenated to two separate words for one name.

The principles recommended for adoption by the A. O. U. Committee on Classification and Nomenclature are as follows:

Omit the hyphen in the following cases (1-5):—

1. In names denoting a body part modified; e. g., *yellowlegs*, not yellow-legs; *goldeneye*, not golden-eye; *greenshank*, not green-shank.

2. In misnomers; e. g., *meadowlark*, not meadow-lark or meadow lark; *nighthawk*, not night-hawk or night hawk; but *quail dove*, *tree duck*, *hawk owl*, etc.

3. In names that describe a bird's call, appearance, habitat, or habits (except to avoid tripling or doubling certain letters); e. g., *bobwhite*, *whippoorwill*, *chuckwillswidow*, *snowflake*, *woodpecker*; but *bee-eater*, *saw-whet*, *heath-hen*.

4. In names abbreviated from a substantive and its unit modifier, formed by dropping the substantive itself and the suffix 'ed' from the compound adjective; e. g., *redwing*, for red-winged blackbird; *rubythroat*, for ruby-throated hummingbird; *roughleg*, for rough-legged hawk.

5. In names containing the word 'bird' as part of the name; e. g., *catbird*, *mockingbird*, *shorebird*, *hummingbird*.

Use the hyphen in the following cases (6-8):—

6. In associations of two or more words (possibly including some misnomers) during the period of transition to the single-word form; e. g., *man-o'-war-bird*.

7. In all compound-adjective modifiers, as distinguished from those that are not compound; e. g., *red-winged* blackbird, *black-bellied* plover, *yellow-green* vireo, *ant-eating* woodpecker; but *great horned* owl, *eastern winter* wren, *American golden* plover.

¹ Although in an ornithological journal, the English names of birds when used to designate particular species, may be regarded as proper nouns, and hence to be capitalized, this rule is suspended in the present article, since the subcommittee is illustrating the usage it recommends.—ED.

8. In names containing the words 'cock' or 'hen' to denote both sexes, unless usage dictates one rather than two words; e. g., *heath-hen*; but *woodcock*.

Use single or double consonants as follows (9-10):—

9. In names having an unaccented syllable preceding an added syllable beginning with a vowel, use single consonant; e. g., *shoveler* (one *l*). (An accented syllable preceding an added syllable beginning with a vowel would take a double consonant, as in the word *propeller*, but no example of this is now available in American bird names.)

10. In words that have been compounded without the hyphen, retain the double consonant; e. g., *killdeer*, *bullfinch*.

Use plurals as follows (11):—

11. Use the grammatical plurals for individual birds as well as for species (*-s*, *-es*, etc.), except in vernacular writing; e. g., *2 coots*, *2 teals*, *2 killdeers*; not *2 coot*, *2 teal*, *2 killdeer*.

With a view to achieving further uniformity in the spelling of bird names, especially among the many ornithological periodicals that now have varying practices, the present writers would suggest two other reforms in avian nomenclature:—

a. Drop the 's from all patronymics; e. g., the *Wilson* warbler, not *Wilson's* warbler. This would be following the precedent of the United States Geographic Board in adopting the forms *Knapp* Landing, *Foster* Peak, etc., instead of *Knapp's* Landing, *Foster's* Peak, etc., and of botanists in using the names *Engelmann* spruce, *Henry* maple, etc., instead of *Engelmann's* spruce, *Henry's* maple, etc.

b. Begin bird names with lower-case letters uniformly, except when they are bona fide proper names; e. g., *western robin*, *great gray owl*, not *Western* Robin, *Great Gray* Owl; but *Texas woodpecker*, *Bendire thrasher*, *Sierra grouse*, etc. This would be in the interest of desirable restraint and consistency in the use of capital letters, and hence of neater pages typographically.

For the use of any who may wish to pursue further the study of the common names of animals and plants, from the standpoint of orthography, etymology, and suitability, a bibliography is appended.

In the list that follows there are included names that under the foregoing principles would be at variance with either the dictionary (Webster) or the Check-list form, or both, and a few exemplary forms requiring no change. Proposed changes in both lists are included, even though no correction in the Check-list form is necessary, in order that the new list may be of use in correcting both. A few of the proposed forms depend, when there is a variant spelling, on none of the orthographic principles herein outlined but follow the preferred dictionary form or that of some other recognized au-

thority, in the interest of the tendency toward simplification in spelling (e. g., *myna*, *parakeet*, *wigeon*). The form recommended is given in the first column; and the figures in the last column correspond with those given to the principles herein enumerated.

Proposed form	A. O. U. form	Dictionary form (Webster)	Principle involved
auklet, parakeet	auklet, paroquet	auklet, paroquet	—
bee-eater	bee-eater	bee eater	—
bicolor redwing	bicolored red-wing	bicolor redwing	—
black-and-white warbler	black-and-white warbler	black-and-white warbler	7
black-poll* warbler	black-poll warbler	blackpoll warbler	7
bobwhite	bob-white	bobwhite	3
bufflehead	buffle-head	bufflehead	1
bush-tit	bush-tit	bush tit	3
canvasback	canvas-back	canvasback	1
canyon towhee	cañon towhee	canyon towhee	—
canyon wren	cañon wren	canyon wren	—
chuckwillswidow	chuck-will's-widow	chuck-will's-widow	3
crane, sandhill	crane, sandhill	crane, sand-hill	3
fork-tailed petrel	forked-tailed petrel	fork-tailed petrel	—
goldeneye	golden-eye	goldeneye	1
greenshank	green-shank	greenshank	1
heath-hen	heath hen	heath hen	3, 8
hummingbird	hummingbird	hummingbird	5
jacksnipe	jack snipe	jacksnipe	—
jay, pinyon	jay, piñon	jay, piñon	cf. canyon
killdeer	killdeer	killdeer	10
man-o'-war-bird	man-o'-war-bird	man-of-war bird	6
meadowlark	meadowlark	meadow lark	2
myna	mynah	myna	—
nighthawk	nighthawk	nighthawk	2
oldsquaw	old-squaw	old squaw	2
ovenbird	oven-bird	ovenbird	5
owl, saguaro	owl, sahuaro	owl, saguaro	—
oystercatcher	oyster-catcher	oyster catcher	3
parakeet	paroquet	parakeet	—
parakeet auklet	paroquet auklet	paroquet auklet	—
petrel, fork-tailed	petrel, forked-tailed	petrel, fork-tailed	—
petrel, stormy	petrel, storm	petrel, stormy	—
pinewoods sparrow	pine-woods sparrow	pinewoods sparrow	3
pinyon jay	piñon jay	piñon jay	cf. canyon
poorwill	poor-will	poorwill	3
quail dove	quail-dove	quail dove	Not a mis- nomer
redwing	red-wing	redwing	4

* Suffix 'ed' retained in the modifier in the interest of uniformity; but 'blackpoll' and 'spoonbill' as in principle 4.

Proposed form	A. O. U. form	Dictionary form (Webster)	Principle involved
redwing, bicolor	red-wing, bicolored	redwing, bicolor	—
redwing, tricolor	red-wing, tricolored	redwing, tricolor	—
roadrunner	{ roadrunner, 1931 road-runner, 1931 road-runner, 1935 }	road runner	3
roughleg	rough-leg	roughleg	4
sage-hen	sage hen	sage hen	8
saguaro owl	sahuaro owl	saguaro owl	—
sandhill crane	sandhill crane	sand-hill crane	3
sandpiper, spoon-billed*	sandpiper, spoonbill	sandpiper, spoon-billed	7
Savannah sparrow	Savannah sparrow	savanna sparrow	Named for the city
shelduck	sheld-duck	shelduck	—
shorebird	shore bird	shore bird	2, 5
shoveler	shoveller	shoveler	9
sparrow, pinewoods	sparrow, pine-woods	sparrow, pinewoods	3
sparrow, Savannah	sparrow, Savannah	sparrow, savanna	Named for the city
sparrow, timberline	sparrow, timberline	sparrow, timber-line	3
spoon-billed* sand- piper	spoon-bill sandpiper	spoon-billed sandpiper	7
stormy petrel	storm petrel	stormy petrel	—
surfbird	surf-bird	surfbird	5
swan, whooping	swan, whooper	swan, whooping	cf. whooping crane
timberline sparrow	timberline sparrow	timber-line sparrow	3
towhee, canyon	towhee, cañon	towhee, canyon	—
tree duck	tree-duck	tree duck	Not a mis- nomer
tricolor redwing	tricolored red-wing	tricolor redwing	—
tropicbird	tropic-bird	tropic bird	5
warbler, black-and-white	warbler, black and white	warbler, black-and-white	7
warbler, black-poll*	warbler, black-poll	warbler, blackpoll	7
waterthrush	water-thrush	water thrush	2
waterturkey	water-turkey	water turkey	2
whippoorwill	whip-poor-will	whippoorwill	3
whooping swan	whooper swan	whooping swan	cf. whooping crane
wigeon	widgeon	widgeon	—
wren, canyon	wren, cañon	wren, canyon	—
wrentit	wren-tit	wren tit	3
yellowlegs	yellow-legs	yellowlegs	1
yellowthroat	yellow-throat	yellowthroat	1

* Suffix 'ed' retained in the modifier in the interest of uniformity; but 'blackpoll' and 'spoonbill' as in principle 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALLEN, FRANCIS H.
1903. Vernacular names of birds. *Auk*, **20**: 236.
- ALLEN, JOEL A.
1903. Vernacular names of birds. *Auk*, **20**: 70-73.
- AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF ECONOMIC ENTOMOLOGISTS
1931. Common names of insects approved for general use by the American Association of Economic Entomologists. *Journ. Econ. Ent.*, **24**: 1273-1310.
- AMERICAN JOINT COMMITTEE ON HORTICULTURAL NOMENCLATURE
1924. Standardized plant names. Salem, Mass., 546 pp.
- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION
1931. Check-list of North American birds, ed. 4, 526 pp.
1935. Abridged check-list of North American birds, 177 pp.
- CRAIGIE, SIR WILLIAM (editor)
1936. A dictionary of American English. Chicago. (Part 1 only, 'A-Baggage,' pp. 1-116, has so far been issued.)
- DEVINNE, THEODORE LOW
1901. Compound words. Chapter 3 in 'Correct Composition,' New York, pp. 61-75.
- DICE, LEE R.
1937. The common names of mammals. *Journ. Mamm.*, **18**: 223-225.
- DORAN, EDWIN W.
1902. Compound vernacular names of insects. *Ent. News*, **13**: 281-283.
1903. The vernacular names of birds. *Auk*, **20**: 38-42.
1903. Vernacular names of animals. *Amer. Nat.*, **37**: 551-555.
- FISHER, WALTER K.
1906. A suggestion [inappropriateness of certain names]. *Auk*, **23**: 245.
- FOWLER, H. W.
1926. [Article on hyphens.] A dictionary of modern English usage, London, pp. 243-248.
- GRINNELL, JOSEPH
1910. The new A. O. U. check-list. *Condor*, **12**: 175, 177-178.
1932. The two check-lists of 1931—a critical commentary. *Condor*, **34**: 87-95.
1934. Further concerning vernacular names. *Condor*, **36**: 165.
- HOLT, ERNEST G.
1924. A plea for more rational common names. *Auk*, **41**: 641-642.
- LEWIS, HARRISON F.
1920. Five propositions suggested to be applied to standard common names of birds. *Auk*, **37**: 501-503, 634.
- LLOYD, HOYES
1922. Popular names. *Auk*, **29**: 144.
- LUCAS, FREDERIC A.
1882. Notes on common names in natural history. *Ward's Nat. Sci. Bull.*, **1** (3): 10.
1906. The question of common names. *Museum News (Brooklyn)*, **2**: 44-45.
- MCATEE, W. L.
1923. Thoughts on English names for birds in the A. O. U. check-list. *Condor*, **25**: 23-25.
1923. Local names of migratory game birds. U. S. Dept. Agr., Misc. Circ. 13, 96 pp.

NEWTON, ALFRED (assisted by Hans Gadow).

1893-96. A dictionary of birds. London, 1088 pp., illus.

PALMER, THEODORE S.

1928. Notes on persons whose names appear in the nomenclature of California birds. Condor, **30**: 262-307.

ROWAN, WILLIAM

1920. Popular nomenclature. Auk, **37**: 499-501.

SETON, ERNEST THOMPSON

1885. The popular names of birds. Auk, **2**: 316-317.

1919. On the popular names of birds. Auk, **36**: 229-235.

1920. English names of mammals. Journ. Mamm., **1**: 104-105.

STONE, WITMER

1920. [Discussion of different writers' views of popular nomenclature.] Auk, **37**: 503-505, 634.

TEALL, F. HORACE

1891. The compounding of English words. New York, 223 pp.

1892. English compound words and phrases. New York, 309 pp.

THAYER, GERALD H.

1910. The possessive form for personal bird names. Auk, **27**: 483.

TRELEASE, SAM F., AND YULE, EMMA S.

1927. Preparation of scientific and technical papers. Baltimore, ed. 2, 117 pp.

TROTTER, SPENCER

1909. An inquiry into the history of the current English names of North American land birds. Auk, **26**: 346-363.

1912. The names "purple finch," "mavis," and "highole." Auk, **29**: 255-256.

TRUMBULL, GURDON

1888. Names and portraits of birds which interest hunters. New York, 221 pp.

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

1935. Style manual. Washington, 330 pp.

WEBSTER'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE (2d ed.)

1934. Orthography (pp. lxxviii-lxxx); plurals (p. 1896).

Washington, D. C.