COMMENTARY

The Capitalization of Birds' Names

ANSELM ATKINS[1]

Common specific names of birds occur regularly in literature of all kinds. Sometimes they are capitalized, sometimes not. The situation is confusing. What's going on?

According to the Council of Biology Editors (1978: 75), one should capitalize "the complete vernacular or common name of a species of birds in accordance with the checklist of the American Ornithologists' Union." For capitalization, then, we have the authority of the A.O.U. (1957) and its reiteration by the biological style manual. What is the authority against capitalization? Any American dictionary. Look up "blue jay."

So there is a conflict: the A.O.U. and the CBE versus an array of dictionaries. What are the dimensions of this struggle, and who is going to win?

I took a survey—limited and unscientific but still revealing. Among the technical ornithological journals I included, not one failed to capitalize: *Auk, Condor, Ibis, Wilson Bulletin, Journal of Field Ornithology,* and *Ornis Scandinavica.* But of seven technical biological journals in other fields, not a single one capitalized specific common names, including those of birds if they occurred: *Journal of Mammalogy, Journal of Experimental Zoology, Annual Review of Entomology, Journal of Herpetology, Wildlife Review, Evolution,* and *Quarterly Review of Biology.* Editors of these journals apparently find no justification for capitalizing the biota they treat. Why, they reason, should they make an exception for birds or insects (for some entomologists want to have capitals too)?

Literature of a more general nature reflects the divided practice of technical journals. Most field guides and some other books do use capitals. On the other hand, birds are confined to lower case in the writings of Darwin, Thoreau, Muir, Aldo Leopold, Stephen Gould, and many others. Highly literate magazines such as *Audubon, Smithsonian, National Geographic,* and *National Wildlife* do not capitalize birds' names. Neither do *Science* or *Scientific American.* A great number of writers and editors thus follow the dictionary rather than the CBE.

No one is challenging the authority of the A.O.U. and the scientific community to fix the names of species as presented in the check-list. Birds' names "are" what the A.O.U. says they are. But capitals in the check-list? Here the A.O.U. runs afoul of a wider authority. Of course, in a free country, the A.O.U. may devise for itself whatever rules it wants. But is it not a source of embarrassment for birders to have to follow rules that contradict the usage in the world at large? Then, too, how do we face our colleagues—the beetle collectors, orchid fanciers, fruitfly raisers, and primate researchers—none of whom demand capitals for their preferred subject matter? *Why are we favored?* Darwin himself carefully refrained from calling any species "higher" than another. Aves are indeed nice, but no more deserving of large letters than any other order.

So much for the arguments from authority and from equality. Two considerations favoring capitalization require response: that common specific names are actually proper names and that capital letters remove ambiguity (see Parkes 1978). I know no sound reason for claiming that birds' specific names, any more than other specific names, are proper names. "Cat" and "dog" are true species (*Felis catus, Canis familiaris*) and dear to mankind; yet, no one dreams of making them proper names or capitalizing them. "Coyote," "bobcat," and "racoon" are discrete species, but we do not think of them as proper names. An *individual* bird may receive a proper name, just as I might call my screech owl "Rapture"; but *an* eastern screech owl is simply *an* eastern screech owl.

It is true that certain indefinitely reproducible human products receive capitalized brand-names and titles (Frigidaire, Mustang, Radio Shack, "Hamlet," "Eroica"). Perhaps it is the unique prototype that is attracting the capital letter, or perhaps there is an unspoken rule that certain "artificial" species may be capitalized. But accepted usage has kept such artificial sets distinct from natural species, none of which are considered proper names by the dictionary. Thus, a distinguished magazine like *The Atlantic* will capitalize "Visa" but not "ivory-billed woodpecker."

As for ambiguity—alas, the English language is full of it. We cope with it as best we can and somehow get by. Admittedly, many birds' names become ambiguous in running prose: "There goes a gray flycatcher" (??). Note that it was perhaps a mistake in the first place to include such general (and pedestrian) words as "common," "eastern," "lesser," or "gray" in a bird's name. Be that as it may, would it not now be easier for ornithologists to change a few names—if clarity is at such a premium—than for the whole world to change its dictionaries?

Language changes; grammatical usages come and go. There are no eternal verities here; convention and consent are all. Rules of grammar are not handed down from on high—they are merely a codification of actual usage. The dictionary says "what is," not

[1] 2525 McKinnon Drive, Decatur, Georgia 30030 USA.

"what should be." Nevertheless, it is proper to follow "what is" as determined by the compilers of current dictionaries. Professional ornithologists and lepidopterists, whose writings surely constitute only a fraction of today's literature, cannot possibly win the day (but what a gallant showing of nets and binoculars against all those typewriters, word processors, and printing presses!). Lacking an Archimedes' fulcrum, we shall never change convention but only succeed in violating it. Meanwhile, our idiosyncrasy causes confusion among those who want to write birds' names correctly. It would be most helpful if we would generously concede and conform. As Humpty-Dumpty said (it's impossible to make it through a reflective essay without quoting Lewis Carroll), it is a question of who is to be master. In this instance, let us surrender to the dictionary. Until we do, we ornithologists, with our Important Capitals, continue to look Curiously Provincial.

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