

## On Capitalization of Vernacular Names of Species

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There is nothing innately unscientific about clear, straightforward language and style in biological publications. Quite the contrary. Clarity of thought can only be enhanced by clarity of language and style. Thus, the primary duty of a biological editor is to help the author communicate effectively with the reader, both today and 50 or 100 years from now.

In my opinion, biologists who oppose the recognition of vernacular names of plant and animal species as proper nouns are not interested in communicating effectively with the widest possible readership, including both amateurs and those professionals who do not happen to be specialists in the same discipline. Even specialists reading in their own field find capitalized or italicized words easy to pick out when they are scanning many pages of material in search of statements pertaining to a particular species. There is nothing curious or provincial about a style of typesetting that facilitates reading and simplifies research.

Anselm Atkins (1983) believes that English-language ornithological journals should stop capitalizing English names of birds, because most other biological journals and general publications do not capitalize these words. He reminds me of my children when they were young and pleaded for special privileges by saying, "But Mother, *everybody's* doing it!" Adopting a certain style because everybody else does it makes no more sense than refusing to make a change "because we have always done it this way." The question is not what Darwin did, what style manuals and dictionaries recommend, or what editors of prestigious magazines do; it is what works best for the readers of biological journals.

During my 20 years as editor of *The Chat*, I have heard Atkins's arguments against the propriety of capitalizing English species names at least a hundred times. I have been told that common names should not be capitalized (or even mentioned, except possibly in parentheses) in scientific writing, because they are not accurate and they keep changing. Both arguments can be applied equally in opposition to use of Latin names, which are changed from time to time and which include numerous errors in syntax as well as some hilarious misnomers. Consider the "scientific name" for the Least Bittern, *Ixobrychus exilis*. Literally translated, *ixobrychus* means "greedy eater of mistletoe"—hardly scientifically enlightening. Although Latin names are not necessarily more appropriate species names than the corresponding vernacular names, they do offer the two-fold convenience of

permitting trinomial designations for subspecies and of remaining the same regardless of the author's native language. Both Latin and vernacular names serve a useful purpose in scientific writing by making clear exactly which organism is being discussed; both deserve treatment in an unambiguous manner.

Let's go back to basics. Proper nouns should be capitalized. What is a proper noun? My favorite English handbook (Walsh and Walsh 1945) says a proper noun is "the name of a particular person, place, or thing." To me a Lincoln's Sparrow is just as much a particular thing as a Lincoln Continental. We capitalize proper nouns to acknowledge their individuality and to emphasize them. What is wrong with emphasizing the English names of the plants and animals we study? Nothing! It is good logic and good style. Capitalizing the English name separates it from adjacent limiting or descriptive words and indicates whether the writer is referring to a single species (three Carolina Wrens) or to several similar species (three Carolina wrens). Without capitals or Latin names, how does one distinguish between three common black-headed gulls (three individuals of *Larus ridibundus*) and three common black-headed gulls (*L. ridibundus*, *pipixcan*, and *atricilla*)? Capitalization offers an effective, space-saving means of eliminating ambiguity in situations like these. Such distinctions may not be meaningful to Atkins or to the compilers of dictionaries, but most ornithologists appreciate the difference.

Style is the prerogative of the editor. An editor is judged by the overall effectiveness of the publication, not by his slavish adherence to any particular style manual. Several generations of capable and literate editors have determined that capitalizing standardized English names of avian species is appropriate for ornithological journals. All of them undoubtedly were aware of precedents to the contrary. What Atkins, like many others before him, failed to explain is how lower-case style is superior to upper-case style on the printed page. His major argument seems to be a plea for consistency. Consistency is good only when it is based on a commendable initial decision; being consistently wrong is nothing to brag about.

The appeal of conformity is very strong. Out of a desire to have *Chat* conform with the major ornithological journals, I suppressed my conviction that the English names of all plant and animal species should be treated as proper nouns until a couple of years ago. The breaking point came when a graduate student, thoroughly intimidated by the "common names must not be capitalized" school of scientific writing, submitted a manuscript listing several plants, including virginia pine and bermuda grass. The time had

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come to take a stand on what constitutes a proper noun in *Chat*. This decision has led to numerous problems, mostly regarding common names of plants. I have to make arbitrary decisions when botanists do not indicate a preferred English name for a particular plant or when I find the same English name applied to two plants not even in the same genus. Such problems arise not because the A.O.U. has standardized English names for birds, but because certain other biological organizations have failed to acknowledge the usefulness of common names.

A capitalized English species name is neither more nor less "scientific" than an uncapitalized name, merely easier to recognize on the printed page as the accepted common name of the species. Common sense and clarity of expression should determine the style of biological journals. Sources of ambiguity should be eliminated in so far as is reasonably possible. If a particular convention, such as italicizing Latin names

or capitalizing English names, facilitates communication between the author and the reader, it should be retained or adopted. I assure Mr. Atkins (and others who share his concern about the way ornithologists dignify English names of birds) that the capitalization of Largemouth Bass, White-tailed Deer, and Virginia Pine will not detract the least bit from scientific facts accurately stated and logically examined.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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