

OUR ENGLISH NOMENCLATURE*

By A. D. DUBOIS

FOR MANY years after subspecies began to be recognized, ornithologists gave names to all the races of a species except one; that one race was designated by the name of the species only. For example, a little more than a decade ago, *Sialia sialis* was a species of which two races were recognized, one of which was called *azurea*; the other race was nameless. We now call that nameless race, *sialis*. It is a mere repetition of the specific name, to be sure, but much better than no designation at all. In the meantime *azurea* has been changed to something else, but we nevertheless now have two subspecific Latin names for the two races of *Sialia sialis*.

In our system of English names we are not so fortunate. Bluebird, presumably, is a generic term; it is our English name for the genus, *Sialia*. How then, in view of our several North American species of this genus, can we be justified in designating one species, much less a single subspecies, as *the* Bluebird?

Of our three North American species of Bluebirds only one (the Mountain Bluebird) has been given an English name. The Mexican Bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) has three races within our limits, with the subspecific names, Western, Chestnut-backed, and San Pedro, respectively, but no English name appears in the list to represent the species. The American Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) exhibits a yet more remarkable combination. It has two races, one of which is called merely "Bluebird." The other race of this species has the race name, Azure. The *species* has no English name whatever.

We have no reason to fear the effect of a touch of science applied to the vulgar terminology. It should be not so much a "vernacular" system as a pure, scientific English system. A trinomial such as "Eastern American Bluebird" would impose no new weight of responsibility upon the barefoot lad who loves all Bluebirds and knows but one variety. Neither need the ornithologist feel constrained to announce to his neighbor, on the first bright day of spring, that the "Chestnut-backed Mexican Bluebird" has arrived; any more than he need tell him that his brother, "James Montgomery Birdcraft", is authority for the observation. "The bluebirds are back; Jim saw one this morning", would convey the information between neighbors quite as fully as it does at present.

As given in the current check-list, the name of the type-race of each subdivided species is usually the specific name, though frequently a subspecific term. In many cases a subspecific name has been coupled with the generic name only, as previously pointed out in the case of the Bluebird. This practice is very confusing to the student, especially to the beginner, who speaks and thinks of birds in terms of English names. As a further example, consider the Downy Woodpecker. This is a definite English name for the species *Dryobates pubescens*. There are several races. One of them (*medianus*) is called the Northern Downy Woodpecker; another (*nelsoni*), is the Alaskan Downy Woodpecker. These names are both logical and appropriate. But the names Willow Woodpecker and Batchelder's Woodpecker, other races of the

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same species, contain no hint that the species referred to is the familiar Downy Woodpecker. Of the common American Robin we have three geographical races: one is called Western, another Southern, but the remaining race has no name. In the groups of Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers the length of the trinomial cannot be consistently urged as an objection, since we already have the Rocky Mountain Hairy Woodpecker.

Many of the specific designations which were contained in the old A. O. U. check-list, but which were dropped in the third edition, might very well be revived. Notable among these was the prefix, American, as applied to such species as the following:

129 Merganser	364 Osprey
160 Eider	475 Magpie
163 Scoter	486 Raven
182 Flamingo	488 Crow
196 Egret	521 Crossbill
221 Coot	529 Goldfinch
225 Avocet	697 Pipit
228 Woodcock	761 Robin

In the case of the Long-eared Owl it was consistent to drop the prefix, American, because it was superfluous and had the effect of producing a trinomial, which was applied to a species. In the common nomenclature, as in the scientific, binomials should be adequate for species. By analogy, it is doubted that "Merganser" is a sufficient replacement for "American Merganser". In connection with this prefix, "American", it is well to consider whether the same English name should apply in all English-speaking countries. The terms American, European, etc., have been used both for species and races. In the case of the White-fronted Goose, if we are to have an "European" subspecies, we ought to have an "American" subspecies also. As examples of other species which are in need of "more" name, the following will occur to everyone:

444 Kingbird	587 Towhee
456 Phoebe	735 Chickadee
501 Meadowlark	766 Bluebird

While the above are all generic names, bereft of their rightful specific designations, there is another common form of abbreviation which neglects the generic term entirely. For example, among the ducks we have the following:

Mallard	Redhead
Gadwall	Canvas-back
Baldpate	Golden-eye
Shoveller	Buffle-head
Pintail	Old-squaw

Such abbreviations as these are very appropriately used by sportsmen. They are natural and sufficient in ordinary conversation and appropriate in literature. Such usage, however, does not justify them in the formal A. O. U. list. The word, Duck, should appear after each of them. We have also the Sora (Rail), Knot (Sandpiper), Killdeer (Plover), Ferruginous Rough-leg (Hawk), Flicker (Woodpecker) and others, in the same category. It is common custom among ornithologists and nature-lovers generally to use the term "Red-wing" as an informal abbreviation of Red-winged Blackbird. The naturalists have a right to their spontaneous informalities as well as the sportsmen!—but

I think they should not be adopted in the scientific list. No species can be adequately named by a single term.

With reference to the kinds of terms that are applicable, it may be said in general that descriptive names seem more appropriate for species, since species are based on distinct characters, while locality names or the names of persons are better suited to subspecies, which are geographically variable and as a rule only slightly differentiated in characteristics. Such terms as Eastern, Western, Northern, Southern, seem eminently suitable for the designation of races, but should be avoided as far as possible for the naming of species. It would probably not be advisable to revise any existing names to comply with such usage, except in cases where an earlier name had been abandoned and could be revived without confusion. I think, for example, that "Louisiana Tanager" was a better name than "Western Tanager". The older name was geographically appropriate, had a historical background, and possessed a certain "color" or euphony, which suited the subject much better than the bald term, "Western". Furthermore, it was in use for years, and is still used in thought if not in print.

Personally, I think that the possessive form is appropriate for subspecific names but not for the names of species. If this were adopted as a rule of nomenclature it would preclude such awkward combinations as Vigors's Bewick's Wren, Anthony's Hutton's Vireo or Frazar's Hutton's Vireo; these would become Vigors' Bewick Wren, Anthony's Hutton Vireo and Frazar's Hutton Vireo.

No matter how "popular" a *false* name may be among laymen, it should not be recognized by a body of scientific men, whose endeavors are presumably directed toward education of the public. A Sandpiper should not be called a "Plover"; neither should an Anhinga be recognized throughout the English-speaking world as a "Turkey"! Even "Nighthawk" is a rather unfortunate misnomer. Probably most of us have been asked if the Nighthawk catches chickens.

Of greater importance than the selection of the most appropriate English names, is the logical presentation of them in the system of classification. At present the species and subspecies in the abridged edition of the A. O. U. checklist are "all in a jumble". Those species which have no racial subdivisions are represented in the Latin nomenclature by a binomial, so that their status is perfectly clear. But each species which is subdivided is represented by the trinomial of one of its races instead of the binomial of the species in general, while the number used therewith is the number of the species in general (without the suffix of a race). The Snow Goose will serve to illustrate. It appeared in the former list as follows:

- 169 *Chen hyperborea*
 Lesser Snow Goose
 169a *Chen hyperborea nivalis*
 Greater Snow Goose

Here we have the two races of the Snow Goose nicely differentiated by English names, of ideal construction; but the first race has only the general number and the Latin binomial of a species.

In the third edition of the list we find it appearing thus:

- 169 *Chen hyperboreus hyperboreus*
 Snow Goose
 169a *Chen hyperboreus nivalis*
 Greater Snow Goose

Thus we have given the first race a Latin name but have taken away its English sub-specific name, leaving only the common name of the species in general. Would it not be far better that the species and its races should appear as follows:

- 169 *Chen hyperboreus*
 Snow Goose
 169z *Chen hyperboreus hyperboreus*
 Lesser Snow Goose
 169a *Chen hyperboreus nivalis*
 Greater Snow Goose

Each species, regardless of its subdivisions or the absence of them, would then have its permanent number, as at present, and would be distinctly represented by its binomial, apart from all subspecies. The Latin binomial should be accompanied by a corresponding English name to designate the *species*. Unmistakable English names for the groups that we call species will become even more essential as our evolution specialists discover and give names to more and more races. For certain purposes the whole subject of subspecies may properly be ignored, and in such circumstances the user of the list of birds, especially the user of the abridged list, desires a clear, outstanding nomenclature of species, in which all references to subspecies are relegated to their proper subordinate place.

Inasmuch as each species has its permanent number, it is equally important that *every* subspecies shall have a designating letter. As previously pointed out, one of the races of every species is without any designation of this kind in the present check-list. This race could be given the letter "z" and no changes whatever would be necessary in the numbers and letters now existing. If we let it be understood that the first-described race of each species will be designated by the last letter of the alphabet, while the subsequently discovered races will be represented by the first letters of the alphabet, the matter will be clear to every one.

In order to carry out this plan it is suggested that the abridged check-list, as well as the unabridged, be printed in such form that the species will stand out distinctly from their subspecies. The natural arrangement is to indent the list of subspecies, to form a vertical column farther to the right than the column of specific names. Under this scheme the Nuthatches, for example, would appear as follows:

- SITTIDÆ. Nuthatches.
- 727 *Sitta carolinensis*
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 727z *S. c. carolinensis*
 (Carolina?) White-breasted Nuthatch
 727a *S. c. aculeata*
 Slender-billed White-breasted Nuthatch
 727b *S. c. atkinsi*
 Florida White-breasted Nuthatch
 727c *S. c. nelsoni*
 Rocky-Mountain White-breasted Nuthatch
 727d *S. c. lagunae*
 San Lucas White-breasted Nuthatch
- 728 *Sitta canadensis*
 Red-breasted Nuthatch
- 729 *Sitta pusilla*
 Brown-headed Nuthatch

730 *Sitta pygmaea*

Pygmy Nuthatch

730z *S. p. pygmaea*

(Northern?) Pygmy Nuthatch

730a *S. p. leuconucha*

White-naped Pygmy Nuthatch

Such an arrangement brings out at a glance the fact that there are four species of Nuthatches on the list, one of which embraces five geographical races, while two others are as yet undivided and the fourth embraces two varieties. In the following summary an attempt has been made to present in concise form the substance of the suggestions of the preceding paragraphs.

SUMMARY OF SUGGESTIONS

- (A) The trinomial system should be followed consistently for English names as well as for Latin names.
- (1) Every species in the A. O. U. list should have an English name whether the species is subdivided into races or not.
 - (2) Wherever subspecies are involved, each subspecies should be designated by the English name of the species preceded by an English subspecific term.
 - (3) Specific common names are preferably descriptive, while subspecific names may more appropriately refer to localities or the names of persons, as well as to minor characteristics.
 - (4) The possessive form should be used only for subspecific names; not for the names of species.
 - (5) A misleading or distinctly false "popular" designation is very unfortunate from an educational standpoint and should not be permitted by the A. O. U. to stand as its officially recognized English name of a species or genus.
- (B) Each species in the A. O. U. list should retain its permanent number, without letters affixed, as at present.
- (C) Every race, or subspecies, of a given species, should have assigned to it a letter of the alphabet, to be used in conjunction with the number assigned to the species.
- (1) For the first-described or type race of a species, assign the letter z.
 - (2) For all other races of a species retain the letters, a, b, c, d, etc., as at present assigned, using the next succeeding letter of the alphabet for each new race.
- (D) The abridged check-list should be so arranged that all species will stand out distinctly from their subdivisions. Species and subspecies should not occupy columns of equal prominence.

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