

Birds of the World: Recommended English Names, by Frank Gill and Mint-urn Wright, on behalf of the International Ornithological Congress. 2006. Princeton University Press. 260 pages, Paperback plus CD, \$19.95 (ISBN 0-691-12827-8).

Language, essentially an agreement of meaning for shared sounds and written words, is the keystone of human society. Yet Great Egret, White Heron, Common Egret, Great White Egret, American Egret, *Egretta alba*, *Ardea alba*, and *Casmerodius albus* are all names for one species of wading bird, and all are used in books on my shelf. While persons versed in nomenclature and taxonomy can figure out this synonymy, such heterogeneity doesn't really facilitate communication. Is there a solution? Does it really matter? Do you care?

With the view that standardized English bird names will promote success in ornithology and conservation worldwide, the International Ornithological Congress (IOC) in 1990 started a project that has culminated in this handy little book. The 11-page introduction sets out the process and principles involved and discusses problems of spelling, hyphenation, compound names, and the like. Even if you don't care about bird names, this introduction is well worth reading simply as an example of clear, concise prose. Then comes the list, ostensibly following the sequence of Dickinson (2003, *The Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World*, 3rd ed., Princeton Univ. Press), with international English names, scientific names, and a précis of distribution by the six regions. An index and a CD inside the back cover complete the package; the CD allows for sorting (by spreadsheets) and gives more details of species' ranges.

This is the first truly international effort at standardizing English bird names—and no small undertaking. Subcommittees for each of six regions (Africa, Australasia, Palearctic, Oriental, Nearctic, and Neotropical) hashed out lists of names, and these were submitted for review and standardization. Consistency was desirable but not mandatory. Simplification, clarity, and unambiguity were the watchwords, tempered with a little common sense over choices, such as, for *Corvus corax*, between the parochial Common Raven and the more accurate Northern Raven (which is northern but is not common where most of the world's ravens occur) or, for *Caracara plancus*, between the parochial Southern Caracara (most caracaras are southern) and more helpful Southern Crested Caracara (associating it with the related Northern Crested Caracara, *C. cheriway*). The list is conservative overall, and has not been an excuse for widespread changing of inappropriate names. Still, a few “novelties” have been introduced, such as “Roughleg” (yuk!) for Rough-legged Hawk/Buzzard (*Buteo lagopus*), where apparently it was impossible to reconcile transatlantic constituencies. Or the sexier Blue-throated Mountain-gem for the Blue-throated Hummingbird (*Lampornis clemenciae*; other species in the genus *Lampornis* are mountain-gems, and there are hundreds of just plain “hummingbirds”).

Beyond potential changes in rules for hyphenation (which, I cede, make sense in this context), how does this new list affect North American birds? Well, not at all unless you want to adopt the suggestions, or unless the American Ornithologists' Union adopts some or all “new” names and the sheep that we are follow blindly. Other potential changes for North American species (in addition to those noted above) include Sage Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) and Gunnison Grouse (*C. minimus*), Great Northern Loon for the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*), Cahow for the Bermuda Petrel (*Pterodroma cahow*, and see below), Great Shearwater for *Puffinus gravis* (there are, after all, more than two species of shearwaters), American White Ibis for *Eudocimus albus*, Grey Plover for the Black-bellied (*Pluvialis squatarola*, and yes, the IOC went with “grey” over “gray,” implying inconsistency with every work edited in standard American English), Pomarine Skua (vs. Jaeger for *Stercorarius pomarinus*), American Black Swift for *Cypseloides niger*, Sand Martin for the Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*), American Cliff Swallow for *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*, Common Starling for *Sturnus vulgaris*, Buff-bellied Pipit for the American Pipit

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(*Anthus rubescens*), Painted Whitestart (vs. Redstart for *Myioborus pictus*), and Nelson's Sparrow (*Ammodramus nelsoni*) and Saltmarsh Sparrow (*A. caudacutus*). So, not too many concessions from the American side, really—and the Brits have to deal with loons instead of divers and jaegers instead of skuas for the Parasitic (*S. parasiticus*) and Long-tailed (*S. longicaudus*), among others.

Inevitably, some of my preferred names fell by the way, and I call the IOC to task on its claim of local vernacular names not prevailing over established formal names. For example, what is a Pediunker? If instead I said Gray (Grey?) Petrel, you could probably figure out what type of bird it is, as well as its predominant color, if you didn't go immediately to *Procellaria cinerea*. Then again, Black Petrel (for *Procellaria parkinsoni*) is not too helpful, and I find the name Parkinson's Petrel preferable. Many seabirds are wide-ranging species not well suited to parochial names. And only the most emotionally castrated human, one who has never experienced the wonders of the Southern Ocean, could ever render the ethereal Light-mantled Sooty Albatross (*Phoebastria palpebrata*) down to Light-mantled Albatross. But, other than failing to have a cognizant seabird subcommittee, I would say the IOC did as good a job as one could hope for. And, as it states, the adoption of these names is voluntary, and this list is an ongoing work.

So, until aliens visit us from other worlds with birds (Pluto House Sparrow versus Earth House Sparrow?), the IOC list of *Recommended English Names* is a good starting point and deserves serious consideration by persons interested in communicating. And, as Tom Lehrer once said, "If a person can't communicate, the very least he can do is to shut up...."

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