

## COMMON BIRD NAMES ARE ALL CONFUSED

By AUSTIN L. RAND  
CHIEF CURATOR OF ZOOLOGY

ONE NAME for one bird sounds a lot easier than it is. A European bird which an American would think of as a chickadee is the *great tit* in England; the *Kohlmeise* in Germany; the *Talgmees* in Sweden; the *mesange charbonnière* in France and the *cinciallegra* in Italy. No wonder the scientists of various countries use an international system of naming, whereby the bird is known to all students, irrespective of their nationality, as *Parus major*.

Even people who speak the same language don't use the same name for a bird. The great northern diver, the moorhen, the sand martin and the goldcrest of England become the common loon, Florida gallinule, bank swallow and kinglet of North America.

Even within the United States the same bird passes under different names among country people in different places, despite

hen of the 1895 edition have become the upland plover and a prairie chicken. (In the latter the heath hen has now merged.)

Many birds had no English names when the world was being explored and novelties were being brought in from its four corners. As people began to write and talk about them, we adopted "English" names from a variety of sources: emu and albatross from the Portuguese, cassowary from the Malay, mynah from Hindu, kiwi from Maori, and tinamou from the Indian. For some, book names were coined: rhea from mythology, tropic bird from its habitat, road-runner from its habit, bobwhite from its call, and junco from its scientific name.

That all is not yet plain sailing in the "English name" field can easily be demonstrated by asking an ornithologist the difference between a pigeon and a dove, or between a parrot, parakeet, paroquet and parrotlet.

### PLURALS ADD TO CONFUSION

With such confusion as this, no wonder the question of plurals causes some trouble.

Whether or not titmice was the plural of titmouse posed a question that recalled the tailor who, having need of a tailor's goose, decided to order two of them. Unable to make up his mind as to the plural, and as neither two tailor's geese nor two tailor's geeses scribbled on his blotter looked right, he finally begged the question by ordering one, and adding a postscript, "Please send two instead of one."

When I looked up "titmouse" I found

that British ornithologists, who are the people that used to use titmouse for the birds we call chickadees, have solved the problem in their current bird books in an unorthodox fashion by begging the question. The word titmouse has nothing to do with the word mouse used for a small rodent. It comes from the Anglo-Saxon *mase*, closely related to the German *meise*; the Dutch *mees*. The prefix *tit*, meaning small, was then added, so that in Middle English the word became *titemase* or *titmase*. Then through a false analogy with mouse it became *titmouse*. The plural, said Alfred Newton, that noted authority of the last century on things ornithological, is not *titmice*, but is *titmouses*. However, when I turn to my unabridged Webster dictionary in my office, I find that the plural is given as *titmice*. As the word has been chiefly of English usage, I looked in the current British bird books to see what

they used. And I found that the word has undergone a further transformation. The British have dropped the mouse, and the small birds are now known as tits; singular, tit. Through a series of transitions over the centuries *mase* became *titmase*, became *titmouse*, and finally became *tit*.

Unlike *titmouse* and *mouse*, the name *goose* and *tailor's goose* are related: the big smoothing iron of the tailor gets its name from the shape of its handle being like that of a goose's neck. Yet the plural of *titmouse* is *titmice*, while the tailor's goose in the plural becomes *tailor's geeses*.

Like *titmouse* and *mouse*, *mongoose* and *goose* are unrelated words; *mongoose* comes from the *mungus* of a Sanskrit language spoken in Deccan. Yet, while *titmouse* becomes *titmice*, *mongoose* becomes *mongoses* in the plural. By analogy one would expect *moose* (for a North American Indian word) in the plural to be *mooses*, but singular and plural are the same according to my dictionary.

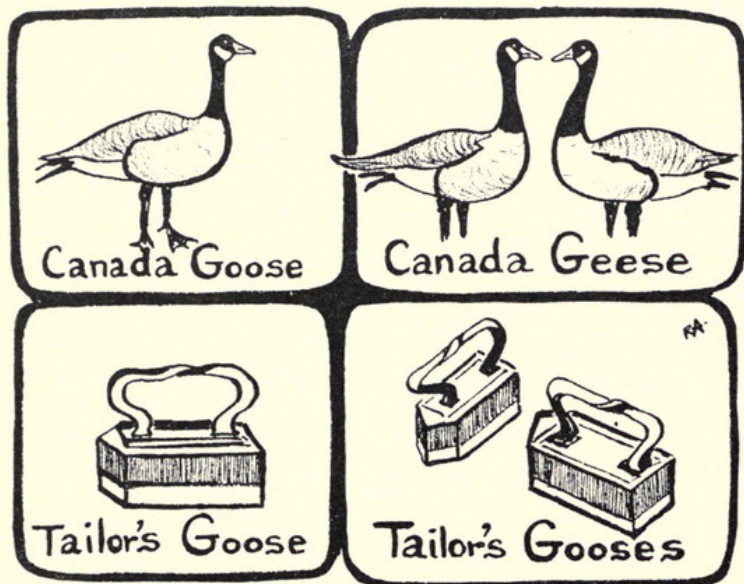
Analogy just doesn't get us anywhere in forming plurals: *mouse* becomes *mice*; *louse*, *lice*; but *grouse* does not become *grice*. Just how wrong one can be in deducing what plurals should be used is well illustrated by a story I heard in the north concerning a whaling captain whose ship was frozen in for the winter in the western Arctic Ocean near Herschel Island, back in the heyday of northern whaling. Here he came into contact with the words *lynx* and *muskox* for the first time. The singular and plural he formed as follows: *link*, *lynx*; *muskok*, *muskox*.

Sports and occupation often have vocabularies peculiar to them, and special ways of saying things. Sportsmen, gunners, hunters and field naturalists, who come into close touch with birds in the wild, and who use their names in everyday conversation, do not form the plural of many bird names as do other, more bookish people, but use the same form for both singular and plural. This has found its way into the dictionaries, as one can check by looking up such words as *canvasback*, *crane*, *curlew*, *willet*, *gannet*, *grebe*, *kittiwake* and *partridge*.

From this state of affairs the bird scientist retires thankfully into his ornithology, where the vast majority of birds have only one current name and name changes, when they are proposed, must meet a rigid set of rules and be thoroughly documented.

### Brazilian Entomologist Here

Father Francisco S. Pereira, CMF, of the Department of Zoology, Secretariat of Agriculture, São Paulo, Brazil, spent February studying the Museum's collections of scarab beetles. Father Pereira, who is here on a Guggenheim Fellowship, is one of the principal authorities on the classification of the coprine scarab beetles, a group of about 9,000 species that includes the well-known sacred scarab.



Drawing by Ruth Andris

the standardization that official lists and bird books are bringing. The ruffed grouse may pass as a birch partridge in New England, and as a pheasant in the Carolina mountains; the coot of New England may be a scoter, which is a duck; while the proper coot of the bird books, which is a rail, may pass as a mud-hen.

### "OFFICIAL" BOOK NAMES CHANGE

Not only do English names vary with the locality among country people, but book-conscious bird people of the United States who follow the "official" American Ornithologists Union check-list may have to change some English names with each edition of the list. The duck hawk of the 1931 edition disappears in the peregrine falcon of the 1955 edition; the willow thrush of 1931 in the veery of 1957, and so on, while the earlier Bartramian sandpiper and the prairie





Rand, Austin Loomer. 1959. "Common Bird Names Are All Confused." *Bulletin* 30(3), 3-3.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25677>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/371320>

**Holding Institution**

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

**Sponsored by**

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.  
For information contact [dcc@library.uiuc.edu](mailto:dcc@library.uiuc.edu).

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.