

ON THE POPULAR NAMES OF BIRDS.

BY ERNEST THOMPSON SETON.

EVERYONE who has studied the subject knows the enormous projectile power of the exact right name when one wishes to secure popular acceptance of any idea. The amount of effort and ability, devoted by men in commerce to securing the right name is evidence of the experienced view in dealing with the problem. Thousands of dollars in prizes are offered for a good name to be given to some new article, picture, idea, hotel or town. Because these experts know that the happy name makes all the difference between failure and nation-wide acceptance.

We have precisely the same problem offered us in dealing with our birds. The scientific names must, of course, be left to the scientific experts, who, we must admit, take them very seriously; but the popular names have been treated in a most casual or contemptuous way, in many cases ignored altogether.

The attitude of the scientists recalls that of the pedantic classical scholars of the early Queen Anne period. They had imbibed such a contempt for the English language of the day that they set about seriously to rewrite the King James Bible "in dignified English." The first phrase of the Prodigal Son, for example, in the authorized version is as follows: "A certain man had two sons and the younger of them said to his father," etc. Such simple language, they said, "savored of the nursery and stank of the gutter," so they rewrote it, in their "dignified English" as follows:—"In remote antiquity, antedating the meticulous epoch of precise chronology, there was an opulent and distinguished gentleman who resided in the agricultural district of the Orient, and was the progenitor of two adult descendants of the masculine gender. Having attained to majority and, presumably, the years of discretion, the junior scion addressed his immediate ancestral paternal relative and thus expressed the result of a prolonged, solitary and introspective cogitation."

This attitude of the Johnsonian school exactly parallels that of our book ornithologists toward bird names evolved by the common

people. And when I remind you that the so-called classical product is remorselessly scrapped now, and, further, that Skeat, the greatest modern authority on English, has warned us that, rules or no rules, grammar or no grammar, classics or no classics, the street language of London today will inevitably become the university language of England tomorrow; and the street language of modern New York, the university language of America, just as surely as the street language of Elizabeth's time devoured alike the Norman French, and the Anglo-Saxon as well as the bastard classic of the pedants, and became at last the language of Oxford and Cambridge.

Now to apply this to our bird names.

If it is the aim of ornithology to spread a nation-wide knowledge of birds, then the popular names are at least as important as the Latin names.

In 1885, I wrote to 'The Auk' on the same subject, (Vol. 2, p. 316) and have no reason to change the views therein expressed.

The scientist, as such, has no more to do with the popular names of the birds than he has with the conjugation of the verb "to be," for these are a growing part of the living language. And yet, the scientists have arrogated the sole right to dictate the popular names, even while they frankly and openly despise them; sometimes ignoring them altogether; sometimes condescendingly translating the scientific name into alleged English, saying that it was good enough. How far all this is wrong and harmful to bird study, I hope you will allow me to point out.

The popular name of a bird must always be produced by the genius of the language, speaking usually through some personal genius who makes a happy hit. The name must be simple, easily said, descriptive, short, and is much stronger if in some way it ties up the bird's characteristics with familiar ideas.

For example, "Kingbird" is a success; is short, is of familiar elements, and describes the bird's character. Every farm boy in its region knows the Kingbird, and by that name, except in a few localities where the rival name 'Bee-martin' still fogs the issue.

If we pretend that the name of that species is "Tyrant Fly-catcher," as our scientists once insisted, our popular knowledge of the bird would disappear and with that all popular interest in it.

Another example, "Bronzed Grackle." For a hundred years, the scientists have been trying to force the people into believing that Bronzed Grackle was the English name of the bird, and have met with the unanswerable response of dumb silence; readers of the scientific bird books use the name, but the public do not. Everywhere to the farm boys the "Bronzed Grackle" is simply a "Big Blackbird." This is descriptive but far from satisfactory. Scores of times I have handed out this name "Bronzed Grackle" to inquiring boys, to find that it never reached their consciousness as a name; it had no appeal to ear or memory; it was hard to say; it was not backed by the genius of the language. I doubt if the word "Bronzed" ever could be; its really acceptable English representative is "Copper"; but the bird does n't look coppery to ordinary view; and the word "Grackle" is impossible, hard to say, meaningless, not striking any familiar chord in the memory.

"Blackbird" is the popular name. But a local genius in the northwest, a boy with instincts and eyes to see, described it and named it as a "Fantail Blackbird." Here was a real English name, descriptive, acceptable; and instantly it was a success. Everyone who heard it once remembered the name and remembered the bird.

Perhaps the best illustration of all is the name of the common American Robin. The scientists scolded the colonists fiercely for calling it a "Robin." It was not a "Robin," they maintained, it was a Thrush of the *Merula* section of the family; and they refused to use, print or sanction any English name for the bird except "Migratory Thrush." After a century of irascible attack, which was received in silent, ponderous apathy, the scientists were beaten. The cause of English triumphed and today actually even the scientific lists give the bird as the "American Robin," by which name it is known to every child in America, and loved because it is known.

For a hundred years, scientists had been trying to make us believe that Rice Troupial, Yellow-bellied Woodpecker, Carolina Nightjar, Virginia Goatsucker, Black-throated Bunting, Vociferous Plover, Golden-winged Woodpecker, Virginia Quail, Polyglot Thrush, Ferrugineous Thrush and Black-capped Titmouse, were the English names of certain American birds; but the genius of

the language was unconquerable, and at last it is admitted by the defeated scientists that the *trivial* names (as they called them) of these birds are really Bobolink, Sapsucker, Whippoorwill, Nighthawk, Dickcissel, Killdeer, Flicker, Bobwhite, Mockingbird, Thrasher and Chickadee; and with that admission public interest in these particular birds takes on a great and enduring growth.

A similar struggle is now going on between the Black-billed Cuckoo vs. Rain Crow, Snowflake vs. Snow Bird, Passenger Pigeon vs. Wild Pigeon, Goldfinch vs. Wild Canary, Junco vs. Slaty Snowbird or Tip, Cardinal vs. Redbird, Sand Martin vs. Bank Swallow, Spotted Sandpiper vs. Tip-up or Peetweet, Barred Owl vs. Hoot Owl, Virginia Horned Owl vs. Cat Owl, Acadian Owl vs. Saw-whet, Carolina Rail vs. Sora, Phalarope vs. Sea Goose, Vulture vs. Turkey-Buzzard, Pectoral Sandpiper vs. Jack Snipe, Gallinule vs. Mud Hen, Osprey vs. Fish Hawk, Peregrine Falcon vs. Duck Hawk, American Kestrel vs. Sparrowhawk.

A few names such as Bluebird, Crossbill, Chat, Wagtail, Sandpiper, etc., have long been such a success that one knows instinctively that they did not originate with the scientists.

Such clumsy names as White-throated Sparrow, Black-and-White Warbler, Red-shouldered Hawk, are, of course, not names at all, but cumbrous descriptions and doomed to failure, while absurd pedantries like Pileolated Warbler, Protonotary Warbler, Plumbeous Gnatcatcher, are worthy of the afore-mentioned pedants of the Jacobean classical epoch.

Names like Blackburnian Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, Townsend's Solitaire, are utterly impossible. They are clumsy, meaningless, un-English and detrimental. I was showing the first of these birds to a group of lively children and said it was called Blackburnian Warbler. A bright boy, speaking wiser than he knew, said, "If it was 'Flaming Warbler' I'd remember it." "Nashville Warbler" is, of course, utterly misleading. We are told that the "Nashville" is a mere fortuitous word added for distinction. Then I say drop it as soon as possible, since it is no more a Nashville Warbler than it is a Virginia or Minnesota Warbler; while the word "Warbler" itself is open to grave suspicion. I wonder the clumsiness of "Clay-colored Sparrow" has not put it out long ago. I suppose the reason is it never was in.

Take the name "Western Grebe." Of course, it is n't a Western Grebe any more than several others; and, viewed from some stand-points, it is an Eastern Grebe, a Southern Grebe, a Northern Grebe, a Northeastern Grebe, a South-southwestern Grebe, or any other compass point you like to give it. But what popular ear, tongue, or imagination is ready to seize on such a name?

It has no point, power or appeal. How much better, for the present, the descriptive "Swan-Grebe," that does, in a small measure, do justice to the superb creature in question.

I suppose, if we are to be candid, the word "Grebe" has never taken root in America. I do not know why. It is, indeed, of French origin; but it has been thoroughly Englished in form. It is short, angular and individual. But the fact is that in the popular mind all "Grebes" are "Hell-divers," and we may as well admit it; although I do not see the word at all in the scientific list of popular names.

I can imagine some hearer objecting here that his ten-year-old boy or girl has all the names at his tongue's end — far better than grown-ups. Yes; I know you can teach a child to talk Latin if you do it at the language learning age and make it interesting; but you cannot thereby make it the language of the nation.

To sum up — I take it that the business of ornithology is, first, to accumulate correct information about birds and then to diffuse it among the people.

If the ornithologists had set out definitely to build an eternal barrier to popular interest in birds, they could not have done it better than by establishing such impossible names as are cited above. They never were, and never could be, English names.

The puzzle has been set forth; now what is the answer? I admit that scientists, describing a new bird, may suggest a name in pseudo-English. That seems necessary. But let them receive fair warning, that it is a temporary makeshift; tolerated, but barely respectable.

How are we to discover the acceptable name? Only by looking out for it, as a precious thing to be found, tested when found and accepted when proven. I shall never forget the little thrill that I got when I learned that, in some good and old writings, a Wood-

pecker was called a "Wood-wale." How gloriously that name would fit the so-called Pileated Woodpecker (whatever 'pileated' means; I don't know). How rhythmic — how simple! How beautifully descriptive. Does n't it make you hear that long, eerie wail in the woods?

Doctor Elliott Coues, with his usual far-sight, insight and literary appreciation, sensed this question, I think; and, in the last edition of the *Key*, made a move toward the solution by offering every name he could find or invent for each of our birds. Take Woodthrush for instance; he calls it Woodthrush, Wood Robin, Bell bird and Geraldine. Why "Geraldine"? I do not know, unless it is an imitation of its note, which is, of course, good. But all of these names seem to me of good origin and sound structure. At a guess, I would venture to say that, given equal publicity, Bell bird" would win over all the others, even granting the already considerable success of the word 'Woodthrush'; because it is so descriptive, so alliterative, so easy to say, so easy to remember and so rhythmic; in other words, it is good English.

At once, I hear the objection that that name belongs by priority to a wholly different bird in South America; and I reply that the genius of language does not know of the existence of South America or concern itself with priority, or with anything but getting the idea into the mind and the memory. As to priority, if that spectre be allowed to walk, it will surely eliminate every popular name on every list that ever was given to the public.

I would encourage all who meet them, to collect and send in the names that appear locally under pressure of the growing popular interest.

I would ask bird men of literary instinct to gather, make up, or invent good names to be submitted to the great test.

Last, for suggestions, I would ransack the pages of those outdoor poets and writers who have the two-fold gift — love of the birds and language-sense.

Thus I would gather the continual product of the popular attempts, until some day, for each bird, is discovered a happy solution that can stand the great and final tests:— Does it describe the bird? Is it short and pat? Is it a monosyllable? Or, if more than one syllable, is the accent on the first? Is it different from

other names? Is it easily said? Does it tie up the bird with existing ideas? Can it be used in writing verse? Does it win the popular attention and put both the bird and name in the memories of the children and of the farmers? If it does all these, it will have back of it all the power of the genius of English to fix it, make it nation-wide and carry with it clear knowledge of the bird.

This, it seems to me, is one of the greatest needs for the spread of bird knowledge in America today.

THE REALITY OF BIRD SPECIES.

BY LEVERETT MILLS LOOMIS.

IN 1858, in volume IX of the 'Reports of Explorations and Surveys . . . from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean,' *Ammodromus samuelis* Baird and *Melospiza fallax* Baird appear as full-fledged species. In 1874, in 'A History of North American Birds,' Land Birds, volume II, these so-called species are reduced in rank, being designated respectively *Melospiza melodia*, var. *samuelis*, Baird and *Melospiza melodia*, var. *fallax*, Baird. In 1886, in the first edition of the A. O. U. 'Check-List,' these names are altered, in accordance with earlier lists by Mr. Ridgway and Dr. Coues, to *Melospiza fasciata samuelis* (Baird) and *Melospiza fasciata fallax* (Baird), pure trinomials and the term subspecies having come into vogue. In 1910, in the third edition of the A. O. U. 'Check-List,' the two names are amended to *Melospiza melodia samuelis* (Baird) and *Melospiza melodia fallax* (Baird).

Owing to his lack of knowledge of geographic variation, Professor Baird gave to each of these geographic variations of the Song Sparrow an entity which they did not possess, and this entity, having gained a foothold in the literature, is perpetuated to-day in the subspecies ('incipient species'). As no one can foresee the future of these variations of the Song Sparrow, it is not known whether they are the beginnings of species or not. Nevertheless, it may be urged that bird history repeats itself, and that the



Seton, Ernest Thompson. 1919. "On the Popular Names of Birds." *The Auk* 36, 229–235. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4073042>.

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