

Bias in American Ornithologists' Union Bird Names

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Eagles, Paul F. J., and Hector Ceballos-Lascurain. 2009. Bias in American Ornithologists' Union bird names. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 123(3): 295–298.

Ornithology has developed bodies to make collective decisions on the taxonomy, scientific names, and common names of birds. This tradition within ornithology assists with communication and reduces confusion. For North and Central America, a committee of the American Ornithologists' Union standardizes the taxonomy and nomenclature of all the birds that naturally occur within that area. This paper makes the point that this activity has been dominated by members from the United States, with insufficient attention paid to the appropriate use of the term "American" or to the concerns of citizens of countries other than the USA. As a result, the term "American" is used inappropriately as a synonym for North American in a geographic distribution sense. In addition, the terms "Canadian" and "Mexican" are used very sparingly or not at all in the English common name for species that occur in those countries. Suggestions are made with regards to the membership of the nomenclature committee and for remedying this problem with English common names.

Key Words: ornithology, taxonomy, birds, nomenclature, Canada, Mexico, United States of America, American Ornithologists' Union, Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of North and Middle American Birds, North American Classification Committee, AOU Check-list.

Ornithology has developed bodies to make collective decisions on the taxonomy, scientific names, and English common names of birds. This tradition within ornithology assists with communication and reduces confusion.

The American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) has standardized the taxonomy and nomenclature of the avifauna of North and Central America for many years. The Clements Checklist attempts to compile a global list of bird species. In the process it also uses English common names (Clements 2007). The British Ornithologists' Union (BOU), through the Taxonomic Subcommittee of the Records Committee, advises on all taxonomic and nomenclature issues of birds that have occurred in Britain and its seas. However, a major change occurred in 1998 when the BOU stopped publishing records from Ireland. This action took into account the sensibilities of the Irish, who objected to having Ireland labelled as part of Britain, as occurred when Irish records were published within the "British" list (Dudley et al. 2006). Birds Australia uses the Christidis and Boles checklist (Christidis and Boles 1994, 2008) as the basis for the birds of Australian lands and water. The Australian movement to develop a national decision-making structure partially came about because of concerns that foreign ornithologists, more specifically those who were British, were not in a proper position to understand and determine the taxonomy and nomenclature of Australian avifauna. Both of the British and Australian bodies have successfully dealt with nationalistic issues concerning bird checklists and naming.

One of the issues involved in decisions concerning taxonomy and nomenclature is the appropriate consideration and involvement of those affected. This paper argues that the American Ornithologists' Union has undertaken this work without a full understanding of the implications of the geographical wording, which includes an overemphasis on the use of the adjective "American" as a geographic range descriptor to name birds that range over areas much broader than the USA. It also includes a paucity of the use of the adjective "Canadian" or "Mexican" for species that occur in those countries. Suggestions are made both for revising the names of the birds and for creating a more inclusive body and approach to the decision-making process.

Background

For North American birds, there is a useful tradition of standardizing the taxonomy and nomenclature, including common and scientific names of birds. This is often not done for other biota, such as plants, leading to confusion.

A problem in North and Central America is that the standardization of bird names has been done without full recognition of the political or geographical realities of the continent. This has led to a distorted view of bird distribution and a bias in the names across the entire continent and hemisphere. This has been an irritant to many for some time. This short paper outlines the concerns.

Founded in 1883, the American Ornithologists' Union is the oldest and largest organization in the

New World devoted to the scientific study of birds. The AOU is the “preeminent scientific ornithological society in this hemisphere” (Kricher 2008, page 32). The AOU *Check-list of North American Birds* is the accepted authority for bird names in the English language and scientific nomenclature for species that occur in one geographical area. The Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of North and Middle American Birds (known as the North American Classification Committee or NACC) is an official committee of the American Ornithologists’ Union. The mandate of this committee is to keep abreast of the systematics and distribution of the birds in North and Central America, with the purpose of creating a standard classification and nomenclature. NACC produces editions of the *Check-list of North American Birds* as well as annual supplements published in *The Auk*. The North American Classification Committee is the decision-making body of the AOU for all matters relating to the North American checklist, including names. It is important to note that the North American checklist since 1983 has included all of Central America and adjacent islands, but excluded Greenland. The AOU maintains that the 7th edition of the AOU *Checklist of North American Birds* is the official source on the taxonomy of birds found in North and Middle America, including adjacent islands (AOU 2009*). The checklist contains names in English. A French version is also available, but only with the 7th checklist. Apparently, no Spanish version has been done.

Scientific names follow priority of naming according to the earliest date of publication (starting with the 10th edition of *Systema Naturae* by Linnaeus, 1758). These are not subject to change, unless for taxonomic redefinition. However, common names are subject to change and are the primary focus of this article.

The membership of the AOU North American Classification Committee has always been strongly dominated by residents of the USA. For example, the committee that prepared the 49th supplement to the AOU checklist had 11 members; 10 of them were American and one was Canadian (Banks et al. 2008). No Mexican has ever been included. No members of other countries in the western hemisphere or Central America were included, even though with the 6th checklist the coverage expanded to all of North America and Central America.

It is important to note that the American Ornithologists’ Union is not the North American Ornithologists’ Union, nor is it the Ornithological Union of the Americas.

American and America

The word “America” has an old and interesting history. In 1507, the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller published a world map, *Cosmographiae introductio*, which ascribed the name *Americus* to the new world. The name came from the Italian Amerigo Vespucci (1454–1512), who had made two trips to

the northern and eastern coasts of what is now South America as a navigator. He published two works, in 1502 and 1504, that put forward the idea that this area was a new continent, not Asia. He was the first to call this area *Novus Mundus*, the New World (Catholic Online Encyclopedia 2007*). This phrase took root and is still used. The word *Americus* became the standard, largely due to the German map using this name for the entire new world from the Arctic to the Antarctic. Some works say that *Amerigo* was used because it was more easily Latinized than *Vespucci* (Online Etymology Dictionary 2010)

The word “America” was used when some of the colonies of Great Britain broke away to form a new country and needed a name; they created the name the United States of America. Many other British colonies did not break away at that time, and today several countries, including Canada, Belize, and Bermuda, can trace their origins back to British colonies. A better name for the USA would probably have been the United States of North America (but even this name is confusing, as Mexico is also part of North America), but the shorter name was used. This country is now variously known as the USA, the US, the States, or America. There is another United States in North America, the United States of Mexico, with the official name Estados Unidos Mexicanos. However, it is almost always described by Americans and Canadians as Mexico, and seldom as the United States, or the States. The plural of America, “the Americas”, is typically used to describe the combination of North America, Central America, and South America.

People who live in the USA developed a double meaning for the word “American.” It is used primarily an adjective to describe a people, in a nationalistic sense. It describes people or objects being from or about the USA, as in the American flag or the American constitution. When a person is described as an American, it almost always means a citizen of the USA.

A secondary meaning of “American” is a location in the Americas. Let us give examples of the second meaning. In the science magazine *Discovery*, published in the USA, there was a story about a geologist reporting that a comet had exploded 13 000 years ago “just north of the Great Lakes” (Abrams 2008, page 60). However, the heading to the story was “Stone-Age Asteroid May Have Wiped out Life in America.” So, according to this particular article, all the area north of the Great Lakes, which is entirely in Canada, is part of America. As another example, in the *Atlas of Bird Migration* (Elphick 2007), there is the following statement: “Uniquely American, the vireos are a group of some 46 foliage-gleaning forest birds...” (page 72). According to this American author, the vireos, which occur throughout most of North and South America, are called “American.” Using this logic, all the birds and all the citizens of all countries in the Americas could be called American.

It is our basic proposition that the naming of bird species by the AOU involves an inadvertent “colonization” of bird nomenclature by the citizens of one country as part of an attempt to represent the entire continent without properly consulting the citizens of the entire affected area. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, colonialism involves the exploitation of the weak by a stronger power. The power of AOU NACC has allowed ornithologists from the AOU to “colonize” the English bird names of species to reflect a nationalistic American bias. Let us illustrate those names.

There are 21 bird species with the name “American” in the common name. It is our argument that it might make geographical sense to call these 21 American if each had the majority of its breeding range in the USA, but this is not the case. For example, several of these species have the majority of their breeding range in Canada, with American Black Duck and American Golden-Plover prime examples. Should not these species more properly be called the Canadian Black Duck and the Canadian Golden-Plover, if their breeding range is the reason for the adjective descriptor?

There are 16 species with *americana* or *americanus* in the species name on the North American list, and an additional 2 on the South American list, *Rhea americana* and *Sporophilla americana*—for a combined total of 18. Of these, *Siphonorhis americanus* (Jamaican Pauraque), has been extinct since 1859, but it is included in the AOU Checklist, and *Ibycter americanus* (Red-throated Caracara) exists from extreme southern Mexico (although it hasn't been reported there in the last several decades) to Brazil. Two of these 14 species have “American” in the common name, American Wigeon (*Anas americana*) and American Coot (*Fulica americana*). The vast majority of the breeding range of the American Wigeon is in Canada, while about half of the breeding range of the American Coot is in Canada. The name *americana/americus* is not used accurately to describe the geographic range of these species, since most of the range is outside of the United States of America.

Canadian and Canada

Even though there are 21 bird species with “American” in the common name in the North American list, there are no species of birds with “Canadian” in the common name. But there are two species with “Canada” in the common name, Canada Goose and Canada Warbler. If one were seeking consistency with the geographic sense of the use of the words and proper usage of “American” and “Mexican”, these birds should be labelled Canadian Goose and Canadian Warbler. But this point of inconsistency in terminology is secondary to our major thesis.

There are eight species of birds with *canadensis* in the species name, in the combined North American and South American list, with seven in the North American

check-list: *Branta canadensis*, *Falcipectus canadensis*, *Grus canadensis*, *Perisoreus canadensis*, *Sitta canadensis*, *Wilsonia canadensis*, and *Caryothraustes canadensis*. None of these has “Canadian” in the common name, but two have “Canada” in the common name. In the North American and South American lists, we have two erroneous toponyms: *Sakesphorus canadensis* (Black-crested Antshrike) and *Caryothraustes canadensis* (Yellow-green Grosbeak). Both of these are South American birds, which have never been near to Canada in the wild. Apparently, in both cases the name *cayennensis* (after Cayenne or French Guiana) was intended (Jobling 1991).

To some Canadians, the most egregious naming by the AOU NACC is that of Gray Jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*). This species is found in the boreal forest from Newfoundland to the Yukon, with a part of its range in Alaska and in the western mountains of the USA. It was known for years as the Canada Jay until the AOU NACC changed the name to Gray Jay. This was a very strange name change, since the vast majority of the species' entire range, both breeding and wintering, is in Canada, and the scientific name is *canadensis*. The closely related species in Eurasia is the Siberian Jay (*Perisoreus infaustus*). That species is found in boreal habitat from Norway to western Siberia. In this Eurasian species, the English common name, Siberian Jay, is a good descriptor of its breeding and overall range—Siberia. Therefore, this species should be called the Canadian Jay.

Mexican and Mexico

Canada is not the only one short-changed in the common names of birds; so is Mexico. The 7th edition of the AOU *Check-list of North American Birds* includes seven species of birds with “Mexican” in the common name: Mexican Jay, Mexican Chickadee, Mexican Parrotlet, Mexican Shearwater, Mexican Woodnymph, Mexican Whip-poor-will, and West Mexican Chachalaca. If we consider Clements' *Birds of the World* and the *Handbook of the Birds of the World* (del Hoyo et al. 1992), sources that have worldwide recognition, there is an eighth species, the Mexican Antthrush (*Formicarius moniliger*). All of these species' names make sense because the entire breeding range or majority of the species' breeding range is in Mexico.

However, when looking at both the North American and South American lists, there are 16 species of birds with *mexicanus*, *mexicana*, or *mexicanum* in the scientific name, with 14 in the North American list and 2 on the South American list. None of these species has “Mexican” in the common name. As a curiosity, 3 of these 16 species are actually misnomers (erroneous toponyms): *Todus mexicanus* (Puerto Rican Tody), *Tangara mexicana* (Turquoise Tanager), and *Gymnomystax mexicanus* (Oriole Blackbird), which have never occurred in Mexico. The latter two species are found only on the South American list. Since the sci-

entific names are assigned by priority, no changes are suggested. However, if the geographical area of bird distribution is important in naming, many more species should be considered to be Mexican in the English common name.

Summary

The important point of this discussion is that the use of the word “American” by the AOU North American Classification Committee as a synonym for North American is often inappropriate geographically and politically. It might be useful to suggest name changes that are more accurate. For example, the American Robin would be more properly called the North American Robin to better represent its range. (As an aside, this robin is not a robin but a thrush, so it might be better named the North American Robin Thrush.)

There are several possible routes to resolve this naming issue. The first approach could be cooperation, with Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean islands, the Central American countries, and the US all working together to remove the American bias in bird names. The AOU North American Classification Committee, at least insofar as common names are concerned, could be reformed to ensure that there is more equal membership from Mexico, the USA, and Canada, with some membership from the island areas. Most or all the birds that contain “American” could be renamed “North American”, to more properly describe their range and to avoid the unfortunate nationalistic overtones. Another route could be the removal of the word “American” altogether. The AOU NACC has accepted the word “Eurasian”, a hybrid of European and Asian, for those species that range over much of Europe and Asia. A new word could be developed to replace “American”. Could this be Noramerican?

Another less cooperative approach might be for Canada and Mexico to go it alone—to establish their own nomenclature committees and then to work to ensure that such names are used in all publications and reports produced and sold in their countries. This would be similar to the Australian approach. However, we would recommend such an action only if the other solutions recommended in this paper are not adopted.

Probably the most appropriate approach is for the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of North and Middle American Birds of the American Ornithologists’ Union to be restructured along more representative lines and for this restructured commit-

tee to be more sensitive to geographical nomenclature and nationalist concerns in devising English common names. Similar logic should also be used for the French and the Spanish common names.

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Received 12 March 2009

Accepted 29 April 2010