

SUGGESTED PRINCIPLES FOR VERNACULAR
NOMENCLATURE

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IN North America for over 50 years both scientific and vernacular names have been fixed by the *Check-List of North American Birds* prepared by the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union. The vernacular names given in the *Check-List* superseded a disordered array of local names and in most cases proved so convenient that they are generally used in technical as well as in popular literature. However, there has been no recognized code of principles governing the formation of vernacular names of birds,* and this has resulted in certain important defects in our vernacular nomenclature.

Current vernacular nomenclature is subject to three basic criticisms:

1. The inappropriateness (misleading quality) of certain names.
2. The lack of a comprehensive name for each polytypic species as a whole.
3. The lack of system in naming subspecies.

Since many of the *Check-List* names had rather haphazard origins, it is not surprising that some are highly inappropriate and misleading. Anyone can think of many examples, such as "Palm Warbler," "Connecticut Warbler," "Tree Sparrow," "Philadelphia Vireo."

Heretofore the *Check-List* has not regularly provided an English name for a species as a whole when the species is divided into subspecies but has often given a distinct name to each race of the species. This results in inconvenience and confusion, particularly in the West, where subspecies are numerous, and where several races indistinguishable in the field, but bearing totally different vernacular names, may be found breeding a short distance apart or wintering together. It is impossible to designate an individual of these races by an established English name even though the species is identified. For example, two races of *Melospiza lincolnii* that winter in southern California are designated "Lincoln's Sparrow" and "Forbush's Sparrow," but there is no established vernacular name applicable to an individual of this species not identified as to race. The same difficulty arises when a population being studied lies in a zone of intergradation between subspecies, or when it is desired to refer to a whole polytypic species rather than to any one race.

* There is considerable literature on the subject of vernacular names; a good bibliography is appended to an article on orthography by Cheesman and Oehser (1937. *Auk*, 54:333-340).

With the trend toward division of species into subspecies the number of bird names has been increasing. Unfortunately, no consistent system has been followed in establishing vernacular subspecies names for the *Check-List*. The names of certain subspecies have been formed by the simple and logical method of adding some descriptive prefix to a species name (e.g., the various races of Song Sparrow are called "Atlantic Song Sparrow," "Desert Song Sparrow," etc.), thus indicating the conspecific relationship. In certain other groups, some of the subspecies names have been formed in this convenient manner, while other races have been accorded names giving no clue to their specific relationship. Thus three races of *Dryobates pubescens* have "Downy Woodpecker" included in their names (Northern, Southern, and Nelson's Downy Woodpeckers) while three others do not (Batchelder's, Gairdner's, and Willow Woodpeckers). In still other species none of the names indicates the specific relationship among the races. For example, the two forms of *Vermivora ruficapilla* are known, respectively, as "Nashville Warbler" and "Calaveras Warbler," while each of the nine jays of the species *Aphelocoma coerulescens* (the Nineteenth Supplement to the *Check-List* includes the *californica* group with *coerulescens*) has a distinct name, as "Florida Jay," "California Jay," "Texas Jay," "Woodhouse's Jay." The same lack of consistency or plan is shown in the naming of new forms in the recent Supplements to the *Check-List*.

It would be helpful if the A.O.U. Committee on Nomenclature were to enunciate certain principles to be observed in the selection of vernacular names in the future, not only as a guide to the naming of our own forms but also in the coining of English names for foreign species, particularly those of the Western Hemisphere. Some day the A.O.U. will perhaps prepare a *Check-List*, not merely for the area north of Mexico, but for the entire continent of North America (See A.O.U. *Check-List*, 4th ed., p. vi). Meanwhile, in the absence of a guide, names selected in the haphazard way of the past may become established in the literature.

We do not suggest that inflexible rules, such as those that govern scientific names, should be promulgated for vernacular names, but we strongly urge that simple and logical guiding principles be recognized.

STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

1. Every species should have a name, applicable only to that species, which can be used in a comprehensive manner for all races of the species, and which can be applied to any individual of the species without identifying it as to race. The species name should be appropriate to the species as a whole, and preferably have associative significance through referring to some conspicuous characteristic of appearance, behavior, or habitat.

2. Every subspecies name should be formed by prefixing to the species name a word or words indicating the race. The subspecific prefix

should preferably be an appropriate geographical term suggesting either the range of the race, or the type locality, if that is within the normal breeding range of the subspecies.

DISCUSSION

Species names. To remedy the great inconvenience caused by the lack of an English group-name for each polytypic species, the present A.O.U. Committee on Nomenclature has announced (Nineteenth Supplement, 1944, *Auk*, 61:441-464) that the forthcoming Fifth Edition of the *Check-List* will provide a common name for each species. This is a major reform on which the Committee is to be congratulated.

It would seem obvious that species names should be appropriate to the species as a whole and preferably associative. An appropriate descriptive name is not only more easily learned and remembered, but it often facilitates identification, thus helping to overcome the initial hurdle to an interest in ornithology—the number of names to be memorized and associated with the proper species. A large number of the names in current use, such as “Red-headed Woodpecker,” “Blue Grosbeak,” “Warbling Vireo,” and “Bank Swallow,” exemplify this principle.

To supply the new group designations, the A.O.U. Committee will have to select, and in some instances to invent, suitable names. The usefulness of such names will be increased to the extent that they are appropriate to the entire species. With many birds, such as the Song Sparrow and Cactus Wren, there will be no problem, for the appropriate species name is already included in the present name of some or all of the races. In other instances, even though at present each race has a wholly distinct name, the current name of one subspecies is appropriate to the species as a whole. It seems preferable to apply such a familiar name to the species rather than to coin a new name. Thus, we would suggest “Black-capped Chickadee” for the species name of *Parus atricapillus*, with “Eastern Black-capped Chickadee” for the race *atricapillus*. In some instances it will, however, be necessary and desirable for the Committee to adopt a name not now in the *Check-List* because none of the subspecies bears a name appropriate for the whole species. For example, neither “Calaveras Warbler” nor “Nashville Warbler” would be appropriate for the whole species *Vermivora ruficapilla*, and neither “Florida Jay” nor “California Jay” would be suitable for the *Aphelocoma coerulescens* group. “Gray-capped Warbler” and “Scrub Jay” * are possible suggestions here. The old geographical designations could be preserved as prefixes to the species name to indicate the particular race, viz., “Calaveras Gray-capped Warbler,” “California Scrub Jay.” Similarly, neither “Green-backed Goldfinch” nor “Arkansas Goldfinch” is appropriate for *Spinus psaltria*, most of whose

* This is the popular name of the species in Florida and has been adopted by some ornithologists (Grimes, 1940, *Bird-Lore*, 42:431. Amadon, 1944, *Amer. Mus. Novit.* No. 1252:2. Pitelka, 1945, *Condor*, 47:23).

species have a black back and whose range extends south to Peru. Some such name as "Dark Goldfinch," indicating the contrast with the pale-backed *Spinus tristis*, might be appropriate for the entire species.

It is certainly desirable to retain many established names regardless of whether or not they are appropriate, but in those instances where a new name has to be found every effort should be made to select a name suitable to the species as a whole.

Implicit in the principle that appropriate and associative names should be selected are certain corollaries:

a) A species name should not give a false impression of taxonomic relationship. Such names as "Upland Plover" or "Mexican Goshawk" are examples of violation of this rule.

b) A species name should not be formed from the name of a geographical or political subdivision. Geographic names should be reserved for use as subspecific prefixes, since they are generally misleading when applied to the whole species. Moreover, when a species originally considered monotypic bears a geographic name and is later divided into subspecies it is extremely awkward to add another geographical prefix to form the subspecies name, e.g., "California Florida Jay." The only instance where a species name might appropriately be geographic is where the species is a truly endemic form confined to one island or locality.

c) A species name should not be formed from the name of a person. Personal names are lacking in associative value, are more difficult to remember, and are likely to be mispronounced; e.g., Holboell's Grebe, Bewick's Wren, Craveri's Murrelet.

d) In forming species names, the words "common," "least," and "great" should be used only with great care. The frequently misleading quality of these terms is well known. The Least Flycatcher is not our smallest. The Common Tern is rare or absent in many parts of the United States where other terns are abundant.

e) There should not be given to one species a name already well established in another country as the vernacular name of a different species. Of the 43 species of gulls, 7 full species are called "Black-headed Gull" by one or more of four leading authors. The possibilities of confusion, particularly with increasing travel, are obvious.

Subspecies names. In recent years it has been suggested that vernacular names for subspecies be discarded altogether since discrimination among subspecies involves such fine points that anyone sufficiently interested and qualified to make such determinations would be able to use the scientific names. It might have been better if the *Check-List* had never attempted to provide common names for all our subspecies. Certainly in naming the birds of countries whose bird distribution is even less known, it is worse than useless to invent English names for subspecies (E. Mayr, "Birds of the Southwest Pacific," 1945, p.xiv). But there are two important objections to discarding all subspecific vernacu-

lar names for North American birds at this time: (1) Valuable data indexed under those names might be overlooked if the names were abandoned. (2) A number of forms currently considered subspecies are readily distinguishable even in the field, and the amateur, at least, needs vernacular names for them.

That subspecies names should uniformly include the specific names has been frequently urged (See J. Grinnell and A. H. Miller, "The Distribution of the Birds of California," 1945). Since a subspecies is but a geographic race of a species, it would be simple and logical if in the future all subspecies names were formed by prefixing a geographic term to the species name. Even now most of our subspecies bear geographic names. Established subspecies names formed in a different manner need not be discarded, but *new* subspecies names should consistently follow this principle.

Existing subspecies names should, however, be modified to the extent necessary to include the species name; e.g., Gairdner's Woodpecker should become "Gairdner's Downy Woodpecker," and Texas Towhee "Texas Spotted Towhee." This method has been used in naming many subspecies, and should be uniformly followed. As it is, the large number of unrelated subspecies names which have to be learned has been a serious obstacle to public interest in western ornithology (R. T. Peterson, 1942, *Audubon Magazine*, 44:280). If all subspecies were named in the manner suggested, the burden of remembering numerous subspecies names would be largely eliminated. The field student would normally employ the species name, adding the subspecific prefixes only to emphasize some particular subspecific distinction. It would clarify certain relationships to include the species name in the subspecific designation. If, for example, the words "Spotted" and "Brown" were included in the respective vernacular names of the various forms of *Pipilo maculatus* and *P. fuscus*, confusion between "Texas Towhee" and "Texas Brown Towhee" (of the Nineteenth Supplement) would be reduced, the former becoming "Texas Spotted Towhee."

The chief objections raised against such changes in current names are (1) that stability is disturbed, and (2) that trinomial names are more cumbersome than binomials. So far as stability is concerned, the slight changes resulting from the insertion of the specific name are warranted by the gain in clarity. Basic stability would not be affected, since the old name would be preserved in the new designation and there would thus be no difficulty in tracing references indexed under the old names. While certain subspecies names would be lengthened, they would be no longer than a great many names now thoroughly established by the *Check-List*. Moreover, the danger of unwieldiness is more theoretical than real. As noted above, the full subspecific name would rarely be used unless some special point of distinction between subspecies of the same species were being made, in which case the full name would be useful to emphasize the point. Thus, today one never speaks

of the "Eastern Song Sparrow" but simply of the "Song Sparrow," except when a discrimination between the Eastern Song Sparrow and some other race is particularly intended.

It has also been objected that if the method here advocated were followed, a change in scientific opinion as to whether a particular form is a species or subspecies would require a corresponding change in its vernacular name. This appears to us an advantage rather than a defect. When, for example, the A.O.U. Committee concluded that Nelson's Sparrow was a race of *Ammospiza caudacuta*, rather than a separate species, an alteration in name to "Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow" would have been a simple way of indicating this relationship—a fact of interest to amateurs as well as to scientists. Such modifications will be infrequently required, and are certainly much less common than the numerous, and often confusing, name changes found in each successive *Check-List*, resulting from subdivision of existing forms into new subspecies or altered views as to the range of subspecies. Even this inevitable inconvenience will be minimized by adopting the method here proposed, for only the subspecific prefix need be changed.

In a few instances the present subspecies name may require a slight modification to prevent clumsiness when it is combined with the species name. The late Witmer Stone used to cite as a difficult example the Great-tailed and Boat-tailed Grackles, but the challenge of this and similar cases can be met with a little ingenuity. The A.O.U. Committee could preserve the best known name by calling the two races "Eastern Boat-tailed Grackle" and "Great Boat-tailed Grackle," or it could preserve both race names by naming the species "Marsh Grackle" and calling the races "Boat-tailed Marsh Grackle" and "Great-tailed Marsh Grackle." While a few cases may be difficult or controversial, there is no reason that the vast majority of simple cases should not be rectified and a consistent method of nomenclature followed in the future.

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