

Book Review

The Dictionary of American Bird Names. Revised Edition, 1985. Ernest A. Choate. Revised by Raymond A. Paynter, Jr. The Harvard Common Press: Harvard and Boston. 226 pp. \$9.95 paperbound.

This is an informative and attractively produced pocket sized book on how and why birds of North America received their names. The original edition of this book, published by the late Ernest Choate in 1973, has been thoroughly revised and enlarged to conform with the sixth edition of the American Ornithologists' Union's *Check-list of North American Birds* (1983).

The first section is a list of common names with explanations of how they were derived. Some birds were named after people. For example, Ross' Goose was named for Bernard R. Ross and the reader is referred to the biographical appendix of people's names which contains a paragraph about each person. A number of common names were derived from the sound of the bird's call: killdeer; pewee; phoebe; dickcissel; chickadee; cuckoo; curlew; towhee; kittiwake; chuck-will's-widow.

Others received common names because of a particular behavioural trait, such as turnstone, ovenbird, and sapsucker, though some names in this class are quite inappropriate. The nutcracker is fond of the nut of the pinyon pine, which it swallows whole, as it does other seeds, without cracking them.

Vernacular names are often very misleading. The European Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) is classified

as a member of the group that includes Wheatear, Stonechat and Nightingale, while the North American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) is one of the thrushes. In England the name was originally Redbreast, but Robin, the nickname of Robert, finally supplanted it. "American Robin" is the correct name designated by the A.O.U., as there are other birds in the world named robin. The name Rubythroat may also cause confusion. In North America this is the abbreviated name for the Ruby-throated Hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), while in East Asia Rubythroat refers to the Siberian Rubythroat (*Luscinia calliope*), a member of the thrush group which included bluebirds. Since a Siberian Rubythroat was reported as a new species to Canada in 1983 (*Ontario Birds* 2:66-69) it is important not to shorten the name of either bird to 'Rubythroat'. Among the common names listed are many local nicknames which may still be met in rural areas and in accounts of earlier writers. The Oldsquaw has at least twenty names, some of them humorous. A few vernacular names are crude. The term Shite Poke, derived from a habit of ejecting effluent when making a startled departure, was applied to herons and the American Bittern. *Poke* is an English dialect word for

a 'bag'.

The next section consists of nine pages explaining how scientific names for birds have developed from the time of Linnaeus onwards. This explanation is concisely and lucidly written and is invaluable to the understanding of scientific bird names and the reason why each species was given its particular name. Scientific names are crucial to the understanding of a bird's relationship by family and species. For instance, the names *Passerina cyanea* (Indigo Bunting) and *Passerina amoena* (Lazuli Bunting) indicate that the generic name *Passerina* shows this relationship. This section explains taxonomy as an art and science, and the mysteries of such things as 'type' specimen, the law of priority, binomials and trinomials, and the problem of making (and unmaking) subspecies. It also explains the reason for continual revisions in the *Check-list* and the never ending struggle between the 'splitters and lumpers'. "Changes in status or other revisions of the *Check-list* are published in the *Auk*, the journal of the American Ornithologists' Union, from time to time between *Check-lists* and serve to keep nomenclature up to date." (p. 90)*

In the list of scientific names, the author explains their derivations from Greek, Latin and native words, as well as from references to people's names. Thus *Spiza* comes from a Greek word meaning 'a finch', *Spizella* means a little finch while *Passer* means a sparrow, and *Passerella* is a small sparrow. However, the name

Passer was given to only three Old World species; House Sparrow, Tree Sparrow and Spanish Sparrow, which are classed as Weaver Finches. The many native North American 'sparrows' belong in the *Fringillidae*, a very large bird family which includes buntings and finches. This section is continually enlightening, though several derivations seem a little far fetched. The Parula Warbler signifies 'a little titmouse', the word Prothonotary is from a Latin word meaning 'an authorized scribe' and *Empidonax* appears to signify 'king of the gnats'. Since there are ten *Empidonax* flycatchers in North America, which are often difficult to distinguish from one another, it is convenient to call a bird '*Empidonax* sp.', meaning that it is one of the species of *Empidonax* flycatcher without having to say which.

A twenty-one page Biographical Appendix in which surnames of people after whom birds have been named follows. Here we can pinpoint all the names we are familiar with through using them in bird identification: Baird; Bachman; Barrow; Bewick; Bonaparte (not the emperor, but a son of Napoleon's younger brother Lucien); Brewer; Cassin; Cooper; Forster; Franklin; Harris; Henslow; Kirtland; Le Conte and many more. It is fascinating to find out why a bird was named after a particular person; some on very flimsy grounds, others for reasons that were well justified. A bibliography of books related in some way or other to the subject of taxonomy, valuable for further

reading, is included. Finally an English/Latin Glossary lists scientific and common names used in the book.

Roger Tory Peterson, in the accompanying blurb, recommends it strongly: "Ernest Choate's *Dictionary of American Bird Names* is not on a library shelf but on my desk where I can dip into it

whenever I am intrigued by a bird's name. . . . No informed birder should be without it." Bird watchers require a specific vocabulary for their esoteric language. Here it is.

* For more on this topic see the article by Alex Mills in *Ontario Birds* 2:43-46.

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OFO Announcements

2nd ANNOUNCEMENT

"Historical Perspectives on Ornithology in Ontario"

OFO Special Publication No. 1

**Commemorating the 100th Anniversary
of the Publication of Thomas McIlwraith's
The Birds of Ontario**

Plans are progressing well for this first OFO Special Publication; many responses were received to our first announcement (*Ontario Birds* Vol. 3 p. 80). Most chapters have been determined and potential authors have been approached. However, we are still looking for additional ideas and input concerning content, format, etc. If you have ideas for articles, wish to write a specific contribution or have unique knowledge or experience relating to Ontario's ornithology, please contact the Co-editors listed below. At this time we are also accepting suggestions for bird species that have undergone significant changes in their status or distribution in Ontario in the last 100 years.

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Corrections: In Volume 3 Number 2 p. 59, the third line from the bottom which reads "Average (N = 425). . ." *should read* "Average (N = 495). . ."