

Notes

Atlassing and the Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*)

In 1984 the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas entered its fourth of five years. With three years of data collection complete, a large data base has been established—already the most comprehensive source of information on breeding bird distribution in Ontario. Much of southern Ontario south of the Canadian Shield has been well covered, though there remain significant gaps in coverage in extreme southwestern Ontario, in the Cornwall to Brockville area and in the Algonquin Park-North Bay region. These gaps in coverage will be the major focus of attention in the remaining two years of the project.

Because atlassing ensures systematic coverage of the province, it has resulted in the discovery of new breeding locations for some uncommon species. Also, by showing the number of squares in which species were observed during their breeding seasons, the atlas permits an easy assessment of the relative abundance of common and rare species alike. This information will be useful for determining priorities for conservation efforts.

The distribution of the

Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) in southern Ontario, according to the data collected during the first three years of the project, is shown in Figure 1. To date Loggerhead Shrikes have been reported in the breeding season in a total of 70 ten km squares. North of Sector 1, single birds were noted near Sault Ste. Marie and Manitouwadge. In total, breeding has been confirmed in 26 squares, and probable and possible levels of breeding evidence have been recorded in 14 and 30 squares, respectively. These numbers are higher than might have been predicted before the atlas project began, reflecting the value of systematic coverage.

The Loggerhead's preference for open country, its frequent use of roadsides along back roads, and its habit of perching conspicuously on wires and on the tops of trees and shrubs when hunting, make it relatively easy to find for such an uncommon breeding species. Therefore, although atlas fieldwork is far from complete, some trends in Loggerhead numbers and distribution are already apparent. The Loggerhead is clearly a rare breeding bird in southwestern

Ontario and may no longer breed south of London. The species' stronghold appears to be near to the southern edge of the Canadian Shield; presumably where its preferred habitat of old fields, hedgerows and hawthorns is most prevalent.

Two more years of atlassing will provide further insight into the distribution and abundance of the

Loggerhead Shrike in Ontario. Readers knowing of other recent Loggerhead breeding locations, or finding new locations during 1984 or '85, are requested to report them to the author at the Atlas Office, Federation of Ontario Naturalists, 355 Lesmill Rd., Don Mills, Ontario M3B 2W8, phone 416-449-2554.

SECTOR 1

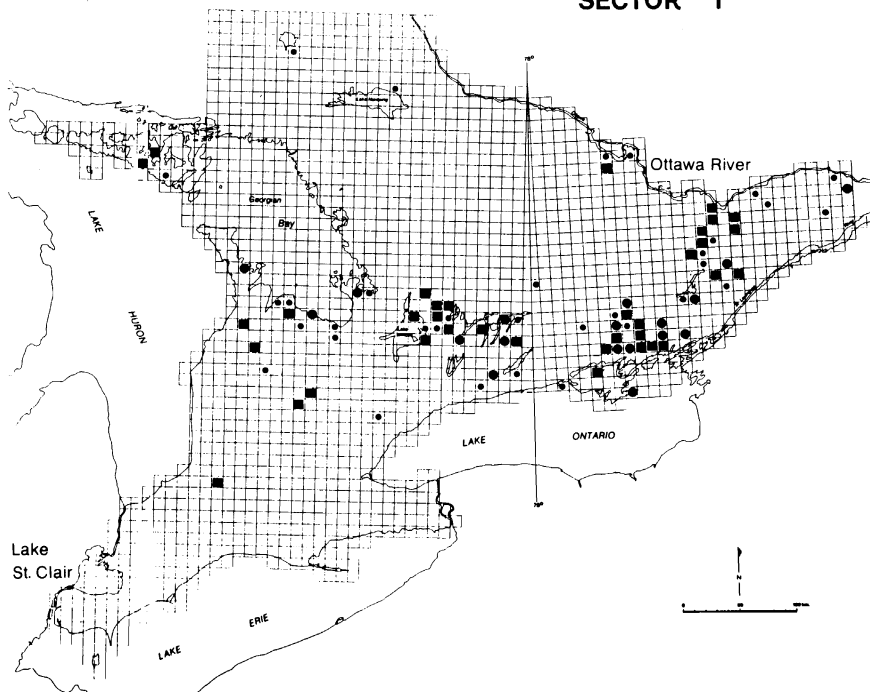


Figure 1. Southern breeding locations for the Loggerhead Shrike up to the end of 1983, according to the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. Within 10 km squares: Square = confirmed breeding, large circle = probable breeding, small circle = possible breeding.

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“English” Names and the New A.O.U. Check-list of North American Birds: A Comment

The sixth, and latest, edition of the A.O.U. *Check-list of North American Birds* has just appeared and is, without doubt, a magnificent, admirable piece of work. However, on the issue of changes in the “English” (more accurately, vernacular names of some North American species, I have some serious misgivings. Some changes are fine, or, more appropriately, inoffensive. On the other hand, others are unnecessary, some new names are inappropriate, and, most irksome of all, several changes are based on a desire for global uniformity in bird names among English-speaking nations, a laudable premise which is quite simply not going to happen.

I would like to take one example, Common Moorhen (new name) from Common Gallinule (old name), to illustrate the above three points. The change is unnecessary, and if anything is a regressive step. It removes an immediate piece of information, the word “gallinule” which indicates a close relationship with another North American rail, the Purple Gallinule, and replaces it with a meaningless and totally inappropriate noun, “moorhen”, which brings me to my second point. Historically, the name “moorhen” is derived from “hen”, because the bird was thought to be taxonomically related to galli-

forms, actually farmyard chickens, and “mere” which is a reedy body of water – hence, merehen. This was corrupted over the centuries to moorhen, totally inappropriate as the bird does not live on moors anywhere in its range. However, the British, as phlegmatic as ever, accept the name as just one of those things that is not going to change – and anyway the “English” name is trivial, as long as the systematic relationships of the bird are known and shown in its scientific name. What has the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the A.O.U. done? Taken a perfectly good and unambiguous name, gallinule, and put us back into the bind that the British find themselves!

Why? This brings me to the third point. The change from gallinule to moorhen was made on the premise of global uniformity of “English” name, and, as the British have historical precedence, the North American population of this bird takes the British name. This is theoretically laudable, if naive, because in reality global uniformity will simply not happen. The British are quite content with the vernacular names of birds occurring in the British Isles, even though some are inappropriate (Moorhen, for example – note, not Common Moorhen, the word “Common” being an American affectation), some species have

group names (Wren, Swift, Redshank, to name a few), and some have actual subspecific names, such as Red Grouse and Hooded Crow. The whole point is that the vernacular names are indeed trivial – in Britain, one talks freely of Hooded Crows and Carrion Crows without assuming that they are different species. Are the British likely to change some vernacular names for the sake of global conformity? Not likely! This brings us to a dilemma that the Committee finds itself in; having decided to go for worldwide

uniformity (but in actual fact it is acting alone) it should change all names of birds that occur in Britain and have a different name (assuming historical precedence). Hence, Willow Ptarmigan should be Red Grouse, Lapland Longspur should be Lapland Bunting, and Winter Wren should be just Wren! The premise could be carried to absurd extremes! As it now stands, the North American name is far more preferable to the British in many cases – and none more so than one which has just been changed, Common Gallinule!

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Bird Names: A Further Comment

I can well remember in my early birding days correcting my father's use of archaic terms like Olive-backed Thrush and Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker. He'd listen, but never heed my remonstrations, and actually, I didn't mind too much. I don't think he used the old names as a matter of principle, but merely because he was used to them and because they meant more to him than their progressive counterparts.

His names arose out of the 1931 edition of the A.O.U. checklist. The ones I and my contemporaries have become used to arose out of the 1957 edition, and the birders of the eighties are finding

themselves getting used to the nomenclature of the 1983 edition.

The A.O.U. *Check-list of North American Birds* is the official list for species names – scientific and vernacular – and the various ranks (families, genera, etc.) to which they belong. It also establishes the official order, a scheme presumably reflecting evolutionary events.

In looking through the new list, alterations of several types are apparent. Latin name changes, vernacular name changes, sequence changes, and family rearrangements are frequent.

The 1957 edition began with Common Loon and ended with Snow Bunting. Others may

remember the 1931 scheme, and real old-timers may remember even earlier ones, such as the list that ended with the Red-breasted Bluebird. Europeans may feel more comfortable with a list reflecting the Old World belief that crows and their relatives are the most advanced and so should terminate the list. The 1983 list obviously will not be the final one.

The list no longer begins with the Common Loon; it now begins with the Red-throated Loon, a not too major alteration. At the other end, however, the change is more pronounced. Snow Bunting can no longer be expected on the last page of bird books. Now, perhaps a contradiction of the old adage "last but not least," House Sparrow terminates the list.

One of the most confusing changes for birders is the rearrangement of certain bird families, especially among the songbirds. The old list ended (for native birds) with the following four families: warblers, blackbirds, tanagers, and finches. Now, member species from all four have been reorganized into a remarkable mosaic in two families. The first incorporates all warblers, blackbirds, and tanagers, plus some of the finches. The latter includes the rest of the finches. For laymen birders, this seems hard to believe. It indicates, for instance, that the Rose-breasted Grosbeak is more closely related to the Pine Warbler, say, than it is to the Evening Grosbeak. Morphology certainly suggests otherwise! But, external morphology has less to do than it used to with modern philosophies of classification.

It remains to be seen whether field guides will follow these new arrangements. For purposes of identification, it would make sense to group birds according to apparent similarity rather than evolutionary similarity. Some contemporary guides follow such a recommendation for the cranes and herons, for instance, so presumably future guides will do the same for other natural groupings.

In a surprising number of cases, the arrangement of species within families has been altered, often reversed. No longer is Purple Martin the "last" swallow; it's now the "first." Kestrel, Merlin, Peregrine, Gyrfalcon is the new order for Ontario falcons, mirroring the old order. The black-headed gulls now precede their larger relatives, and it seems odd to have kingbirds at the end of the flycatchers. Black-and-white Warbler and American Redstart, once the advance and rear guards of the warblers, are now adjacent in the middle!

Though these changes may be hard to get used to, it must be assumed that they reflect the current state of the art in evolutionary ornithology. As such, birders probably cannot be critical. However, the rulings on common names, as indicated in the new list, are really an intervention characterized by an annoying mixture of principles.

In cases where species have been merged, such as Whistling Swan and its European counterpart, obviously a new common name is required (in this case, Tundra Swan). In other cases, the

new name chosen is conceded to be superior to the old one. For example, Sedge Wren seems to be a suitable replacement for the unwieldy, unappealing, and inappropriate Short-billed Marsh Wren.

Academic biologists usually stress that the only legitimate names for species are their Latin names; common names often don't indicate any evolutionary philosophy or relationship and so aren't suited for scientific use.

Feeling that both vernacular and scientific names "are replete with absurdities, inaccuracies and false taxonomic implications," Ludlow Griscom in the September 1947 issue of the *Auk* formally proposed that the names in the 1931 edition be conserved. He also felt that birders – like amateur botanists and entomologists, for example – should use scientific names and could use scientific names with no more difficulty than that encountered with common names.

Obviously, as our knowledge of relationships among birds changes, so too must the scientific names and their arrangements change. However, it is questionable whether or not the A.O.U. should be dogmatic about common names.

In most cases, the 1983 changes are annoying and unnecessary. Presumably, our yellow-capped woodpeckers are now called Three-toed and Black-backed so that the former agrees with the European name. (There is only one species in Europe). If we want agreement in this case, it would make more sense for the Europeans to change their Three-toed to Northern Three-toed, since

there are, after all, two three-toed species.

By the same reasoning, Common Gallinule is now Common Moorhen, even though the name Purple Gallinule is unchanged. Incidentally, only the former is in the genus *Gallinula*.

If the policy were consistent, these changes could perhaps be logically argued on the basis of standardizing European and North American names. Many common to both continents, however, still hold different names. Why didn't Oldsquaw become Long-tailed Duck, and why are the longspurs still longspurs and not buntings? It would be a shame if we eventually surrender these and other North American names like Bohemian Waxwing, kinglet, loon, and jaeger for their European equivalents.

So, although it is admitted that the A.O.U. is the proper body to establish scientific names and evolutionary relationships, the body responsible for English names should be some other. Perhaps a group representing the "collective birding conscience" and working in conjunction with the Latin changes formalized by the A.O.U. should be responsible and should concern itself with the conservation of long-established English names. Since lay people are the ones who most often use common names, a culturally-determined set of popular names is superior to a scientifically-determined imposed set.

In the October 1909 issue of *Auk*, Spencer Trotter considered the history of vernacular names: "A respectable antiquity attaches itself to the vernacular. Long

before the scientific mind had invaded the field of natural history, the folk had given voice to its ideas . . .”

As a matter of fact, many natural or colloquial names exhibit much more imagination than the less natural A.O.U. names. I'd much rather call a Great Black-backed Gull a Coffin-bearer or a Gray Jay a Whiskeyjack. Throat-cut for Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Bogsucker for American Woodcock, Burgomaster for Glaucous

Gull, Gump for Black-bellied Plover, and Stub-winged Bullet Hawk for Sharp-shinned Hawk are all superior to their legitimate more artificial names. Perhaps Demoiselle-of-the-marshes for Louisiana Heron (1957) or Tricoloured Heron (1983) and Saffron-headed Maizo-bird for Yellow-headed Blackbird are a little ridiculous, but we don't want to see a future day that requires us to use dry names or worse still, A.O.U. numbers.

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Observations at a Major Crow Roost in St. Catharines, Ontario

A notable feature in late afternoon in winter along the Niagara Escarpment just south of St. Catharines is the regular procession of loose flocks of American Crows (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*) flying into the city, mainly from the southwest. The growing interest in American Crow roosts in southern Ontario in winter (Lamoureux and Lamoureux 1980, Weseloh 1983) prompted us to look more closely at some aspects of the American Crows in this area, especially since the number of crows reported (1366 birds) on the 1982 St. Catharines Christmas Bird Count was the second highest in Ontario. We decided to collect information on the size and location of the roost and, where possible, the pre-roost gathering sites, and on the direction of flight lines.

Counts were made at about four day intervals from 12 October to 12 November 1983 and on five days in January and February 1984. The crows arrived at the pre-roost sites and the roost itself along relatively narrow flight pathways, mainly from the southwest, with a few flocks arriving from the west. This allowed an observer standing at a suitable spot on top of the escarpment to count or estimate the number of crows flying toward the roost or pre-roost site. Counts in January were also made at pre-roost sites, which were found by following flocks of crows to where they were gathering.

Counts of crows were much higher in mid-winter than in the late fall. During October and November, the numbers flying into the roost were between 2000 and

3000 (average 2689), ranging from a high of 4859 on 20 October to a low of 1581 on 5 November. The high counts during the third week of October may have been due to the resident population being augmented by migrant birds. Counts in winter were much higher, averaging between 6000 and 7000 birds (for example, 6800 on 25 January, 6500 on 26 January, and 6500 on 2 February). This concentration of crows is therefore one of the largest reported in Canada, ranking second behind the huge roost in Essex County (Weseloh 1983).

The roost itself was located in October in a willow, aspen and maple woodlot along the north facing slope of the escarpment near the corner of Glendale Avenue and Mountain Street within the St. Catharines city boundary. This site was used consistently during the winter, although the same part of the woodlot was not necessarily used every night. In fact, the roost shifted about 0.5 km to the east between early October and early November, and had shifted 0.75 km to the west by late January. The location of pre-roost sites often varied; for example, 5200 crows collected in a field 1 km south of the roost on 25 January, whereas the next day 6500 perched atop mature trees on the wooded escarpment close to Brock University.

We obtained temperature readings from the Niagara District Airport, and took light intensity readings with a Gossen Luna-6 Light Meter, to see if the crows'

arrival at the roost was influenced by temperature or light intensity. No obvious trends emerged. In fact, arrival patterns were predictable in the fall, whatever the immediate weather conditions were; as a rule, groups of up to 30 birds began arriving at the roost about 30-40 minutes before sunset, flying in from the west and southwest. The majority of birds arrived at the roost, again from the southwest, during a 20 minute period around sunset, ten minutes before, ten minutes after, and then arrivals would abruptly stop.

In January, the situation was somewhat different. The roost at Glendale and Mountain was not occupied until well after sunset. For example, on 26 January, the birds stayed at the pre-roost gathering near Brock University, calling noisily and moving back and forth along the tree tops, from 1645 to 1755h, 44 minutes after official sunset, and then left in flocks up to 1000 eastwards toward the roost.

The strong tendency of birds to arrive from the southwest is probably because they are foraging during the day in the numerous corn fields in the regional municipalities of Pelham, Welland and Thorold. Very little suitable land for foraging occurs north and east of the roost, which means in effect that fairly accurate numbers can be determined by counting along two flightlines (southwest and west). As a final comment, the present roost site is in a location potentially vulnerable to development; an area of the escarpment adjacent to the roost is scheduled for a housing/industrial devel-

opment, which could cause considerable future disturbance to the crow roost.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

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Lamoureux. 1980. Observations on the behaviour of the Common Crow. *The Garden's Bulletin* 32: 9-14.

Weseloh, D.V. 1983. A large crow roost in Essex County. *Ontario Birds* 1:61-63.

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Book Reviews

The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding, Vol. 1: Loons to Sandpipers, Vol. 2: Gulls to Dippers, Vol. 3: Old World Warblers to Sparrows. 1983. *John Farrand* (editor), Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1244 pp., \$18.50 each, paperbound.

National Geographic Society Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 1983. *Shirley L. Scott* (editor). Kingsport Press: Tennessee, 464 pp., \$20.00 paperbound. (In Ontario available only from "Friends of Point Pelee", c/o Point Pelee National Park, R.R. #1, Leamington, Ontario N8H 3V4.)

If one were to ask a typical birder for advice concerning the purchase of a North American field guide, chances are that the reply would be either "*Peterson's*" or "*The Golden Guide*". Most, in fact, would probably recommend obtaining both. The past year, however, has seen the emergence of no less than three "new" field guides, all of which purport to provide the most thorough and up-to-date treatment of North

American birds. The choice is no longer that straightforward; suddenly birders are faced with a new and perplexing dilemma. Do these new guides truly live up to their claims? Which one is the best suited to my level of expertise? Do they represent an improvement over what is currently available? Given the high price of books, which one provides the best value for the money?

The three-volume *Audubon*