

AN HONOR WITHOUT PROFIT

by Richard K. Walton

eponymy *n* The derivation of a name of a city, country, era, institution, or other place or thing from the name of a person.

Gruson in his *Words for Birds* gives seven categories for the origins of common bird names: appearance (Black-capped Chickadee), eponymy (Henslow's Sparrow), echoics (Whooping Crane), habitat (Marsh Wren), behavior (woodpecker), food (oystercatcher), and region (California Condor). The second category comprises people and places memorialized in bird names. Many of our most famous ornithologists as well as a fair number of obscure friends and relations have been so honored. A majority of these names were given during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the pioneering era of North American ornithology. While some of these tributes are kept alive in our everyday birding language, others have slipped into oblivion. Recognition or obscurity may ultimately hinge on the names we use for birds.

There is no more famous name in the birding culture than that of John James Audubon. His epic *The Birds of America* was responsible for putting American science, art, and even literature on the international map. This work was created, produced, promoted, and sold largely by Audubon himself. In the years since his death in 1851, the Audubon legend has been the inspiration for a multitude of ornithological pursuits and causes, both professional and amateur. Audubon painted some five hundred birds in *Birds of America* and described these in his five-volume *Ornithological Biographies*. Many of the names given by Audubon honored men and women of his era. These names and their subsequent revisions and deletions provide interesting examples of taxonomic history.

If Audubon were to return to his old birding haunts to join a contemporary tour in search of May migrants, he would, at the very least, be puzzled. Many of the bird names he was accustomed to are no longer in use. A look through the first hundred plates of his *Birds of America* indicates the enormity of these changes. Half of the birds depicted are assigned names different from those used in present-day standard common nomenclature. The reasons for the changes are numerous. The disparity between Audubon's names and current names occurs in part because Audubon was either misinformed or mistaken about the birds in question. Many other name changes were the result of taxonomic and nomenclature revisions subsequent to *Birds of America*.

Today's birder, armed with a knapsack full of field guides, is well equipped to deal with the plumage variations of individual species. Learning the different sex, seasonal, and age characteristics is part of the game. Because Audubon was

literally writing the book on American birds, he was in the difficult position of trying to sort out most of these variations for the first time. It is not surprising that he and many of his contemporaries made the same mistakes that are made by the beginning student of birds today. Audubon, however, was in a position to name, describe, and publish the birds with the conviction that he had discovered a new species. Examples of mistakes in this category are Vigors Vireo (Havell Plate XXX), Rathbone Warbler (Havell Plate LXV), and Le Petit Caporal (Havell Plate LXXV). Because these were actually forms of the Pine Warbler, Yellow Warbler, and Merlin that had been previously described and named, Audubon's nomenclature was expunged. Those honored by Audubon received short shrift, ornithologically speaking.

As for the English naturalist Nicholas A. Vigors, Audubon would not have cared in the least. Audubon met Vigors, the presiding secretary of the Zoological Society of London, in 1828. Initially Vigors assisted Audubon with his project and introduced him to influential naturalists. The relationship may have begun to sour when Audubon repaid Vigors' kindness by refusing to write for the *Zoological Journal*. Audubon felt any such writing would be the subject of abuse. Five years later in a letter to his son Victor, Audubon remarked that despite the fact that "such fellows as Vigors should mortify us," they needed to push on with their great project.

The Rathbone family was a different matter. They were among Audubon's most ardent supporters in England. In his account which accompanied the plate of this bird, he made clear his indebtedness to the Rathbone family. Audubon thanked them "for all the unmerited kindness and unlooked-for friendship which I have received from the RATHBONES of Liverpool...."

Le Petit Caporal is a reference to Napoleon. Audubon said that he wished he could find a new species of eagle with which to properly honor "le Grande" but that this little hawk would have to do. Audubon had not always been so impressed by the Napoleonic adventures. At the age of eighteen Audubon fled France, using false documents to avoid conscription into Napoleon's army. The names of Vigors, Rathbone, and Le Petit Caporal quickly found their way to the nomenclature graveyard.

Another group of birds depicted and named by Audubon, the names of which are not in common use today, are species for which there have been no subsequent records. In addition to specters such as Carbonated Warbler (Havell Plate LX) and Blue Mountain Warbler and Small-headed Flycatcher (Havell Plate CCCCXXXIV), Audubon honored two gentlemen with species that have proved particularly elusive. Audubon named Cuvier's Regulus (Havell Plate LV) in honor of Georges Cuvier. Cuvier, the pioneering paleontologist and taxonomist, was a leading light in natural history during the first part of the nineteenth century. Audubon was Cuvier's guest in Paris and at Versailles in the

autumn of 1828. Cuvier was impressed with Audubon's work, subscribed to *Birds of America*, and promoted Audubon within the French scientific community. Although Cuvier's reputation is secure on other grounds, Cuvier's Kinglet added little to the Frenchman's fame. All that remains is Audubon's description of a bird he apparently collected in Pennsylvania in 1812. This species was never again seen, and some ornithologists now feel that the bird was simply an aberrant Golden-crowned Kinglet. Townsend's Bunting (Havell Plate CCCC), however, remains something of an enigma. John Kirk Townsend was an American naturalist from Philadelphia. In May 1833 Townsend collected the bird in question and sent it to Audubon. Working from this specimen, Audubon named (after its discoverer), described, and pictured this unique bird. The skin still exists and resides at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. Present-day opinion suggests that this may be either a hybrid (Dickcissel x Blue Grosbeak) or a Dickcissel with abnormal pigmentation. Everyone seems to agree that no such species exists in today's avifauna.

Although Audubon may in some sense be held accountable for difficulties with the birds described above, there is another group of birds included in *The Birds of America*, whose names are things of the past as a result of events over which Audubon had no control. Taxonomic and nomenclature changes have resulted in the deletion of these names. Gone with the names are the honors so carefully bestowed by Audubon.

Names for North American birds are controlled by the American Ornithologists' Union (A.O.U.) Committees on Nomenclature and Classification. Their policies, guidelines, and lists can be found in the *Check-list of North American Birds* as well as in various supplements published in *The Auk*. The *Check-list* has been through six editions, the first appearing in 1886, the most recent in 1983. Both Latin names and standard common names are published in the *Check-list*. Frequently, changes in common names simply reflect the present committee's commitment to uniformity and clarity; at other times these changes reflect corresponding changes in the Latin nomenclature. Changes in the Latin names usually indicate that ornithologists are convinced they have learned something new about the organism and its relationship to other birds. Sometimes a single species is determined actually to be two species or, conversely, two or more species are combined into a single species. In the vernacular these processes are referred to, respectively, as splitting and lumping. Both actions may result in the delisting of names that honor individuals.

Audubon honored Thomas Stewart Traill with Traill's Flycatcher (Havell Plate XLV). Traill, a Scottish zoologist, was another European who assisted Audubon. Traill provided introductions, scheduled lectures, and promoted shows for Audubon and his paintings. For more than a century the name of Traill was part of birders' language. By the late 1960s, however, there were

enough data available on various aspects of the morphology and behavior of these flycatchers to support the separation into two species. What had previously been thought to be subspecies were actually two species that are reproductively isolated. In 1973 as part of the thirty-second supplement to the *Check-list*, the A.O.U. split this species and gave the names of Willow Flycatcher and Alder Flycatcher as the standard common nomenclature. Gone was the common name, Traill's Flycatcher. Fortunately, in this case, all was not lost. The Latin name for the Willow Flycatcher, *Empidonax traillii*, maintains the original reference.

Audubon himself was the victim of delisting in the same 1973 supplement. The John Townsend whom Audubon had honored returned the favor in 1837. One of the new species discovered by Townsend on a trip to the Pacific Northwest was a warbler he named Audubon's Warbler (Havell Plate CCCXCV). Unfortunately, two forms, Myrtle Warbler and Audubon's Warbler, were later lumped when evidence was presented that these birds readily interbreed and produce a viable population. In their attempt to find a name suitable for both forms, the Committee on Nomenclature decided on Yellow-rumped Warbler. Thus, Audubon suffered the same fate as so many he had sought to honor. The American woodsman's name is still honored with the Audubon's Shearwater.

At least a dozen other names, given by Audubon and honoring individuals, have been expunged for one or another of the reasons given above. Havell Plate CCCXVII holds the dubious distinction of having had four birds delisted: Maria's Woodpecker, Phillip's Woodpecker, Harris's Woodpecker, and Audubon's Woodpecker. These birds are all forms of the Hairy Woodpecker. Certainly such duplication of names is not in the interest of a workable nomenclature; however, this has not been the reason for many delistings. Names such as Baird, Bullock, Coues, Sennett, Wied, and Wilson have found their way to the wastebin in the service of uniformity. As the *Check-list* committee has reminded us, "progress in systematic ornithology often dictates changes in scientific names...[and] some changes in English names help to avoid confusion and promote uniformity." The question arises, however: Will all common-name references to men and women gradually be laundered? There seems to be some inexorable process at work leading toward a list of names admirable for its uniformity, but lacking all references to our ornithological past. Will we end up with a nomenclature in which all mention of significant personages lies buried in the technical language? A few of those whom Audubon memorialized are still a part of our everyday birding language: Bachman, Bewick, Henslow, Lincoln, Swainson, and Townsend. For the time being at least, these names are oft spoken reminders of our traditions and our past.

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