

and “little gull” are always trotted out in defense of this position. The fact is that in ornithological publications no careful editor would allow the ambiguous use of these names. If you see “yellow warbler” here, rest assured it means *Dendroica petechia*.

The often-heard assertion that the English names of birds are proper nouns and must be capitalized ignores standards of grammar. Proper names are normally singular in form, and do not easily accept limiting modifiers. They represent one of a kind, but a yellow warbler is not unique. While there are exceptions (counting names “We have five red-headed Roberts in this class,” or shared surnames “Who killed the Kennedys?” or metaphors “They were the Churchills of China”), proper nouns like Canada and Empire State Building and Confucius resist pluralization or even the indefinite article “a.” Test it yourself. This is not the case with bird names. We can see some veeries, each of them a different individual legitimately sharing the name. A veery is one of many kinds of birds, and there are lots of veeries. The word does not rate a capital letter every time it is used, unlike “Euphrates” or “Marcus Garvey” or “North America.”

Most respected periodicals on science do not capitalize bird names. You won’t see misplaced capitals in journals like “Science,” “Scientific American,” “Nature,” “Ecology,” “American Scientist,” “Audubon,” or “Natural History.” You won’t see bird names capitalized in your dictionary, or in your newspaper, any more than in publications of The Nature Conservancy. Revered nature writers like Aldo Leopold, John Burroughs, Joseph Wood Krutch, Stephen Jay Gould, and John Kricher don’t capitalize bird names. Nor do distinguished ornithological authors like Bernd Heinrich, Paul Johnsgard, Brian Harrington, Allan Cruickshank, Peter Mathiessen, or Steven Hilty.

You won’t see capitalized English species names in the professional journals of most of the sciences. The notable exception is ornithology. Ornithologists follow Audubon’s and Wilson’s eighteenth-century usage. Their works resemble old documents like the US Constitution, where all nouns are capitalized (We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice,...) more than modern prose. The time-honored system of scientific nomenclature insists that names should be singular and unequivocal, and there are elaborate and elegant rules to govern binomial scientific names to ensure this. Ornithology has gone further, standardizing English names for birds, and for all the same reasons this is a good idea.

Regularizing English names has seemed advisable also because of the large role amateurs have always played in bird study, as well as birds’ significance for other non-scientists---good reasons to engage a large and diverse community in unambiguous discourse. But birds’ names are not brand names like Twinkies®, and do not require capitalization. I have seen some editors treat these bird “brand names” as so sacrosanct as to require bizarre plural forms such as “Veerys” or “boobys” to avoid infringing on their supposedly inviolable integrity. Their strict obedience to the American Ornithologists’ Union policy on English names is touchingly reverential, but misguided.

Unnecessary capitals are stilted, puzzling to most readers, and unsanctioned by present-day standards of grammar or usage. They are, moreover, unnecessary for clear communication. As much as we honor the AOU’s scientific pronouncements, they have no qualifications in English prose. We’d no sooner go to the AOU for advice on that topic than we’d ask a carpenter how to make soup. We were writing “Ross’s goose” when they still insisted on the erroneous “Ross’ goose,” and we will continue using standard English usage to work with common bird names as well. ---BW

The Ohio Cardinal

A Parting Shot . . .



The presumed nesting attempt at Big Island WA in Marion Co. by the pair of black-necked stilts led to multiple observers having the opportunity to view these attractive creatures. Jay Lehman digiscoped this image from 50-75 yards 9 June 2004.

A friendly reminder . . .

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