

cartons are cut to specifications and then one is inserted into the other. The assembled nest box is painted inside and out with brown outdoor spray enamel. A hole 1 1/4 inches in diameter is made through the double layers of the milk cartons centered on one side, about three inches from the top. Small vent holes should be cut in the sides of the roof cap and drainage holes cut in the floor. The milk carton nest boxes are attached to trees with strong two-inch strapping tape. I suggest painting the tape to make it less obvious.

Assembly of milk carton nest boxes is easy and less time-consuming than that of wooden nest boxes. These nest boxes are also easy to carry and place as well as environmentally friendly. They are disposable and biodegradable. Milk carton nest boxes are readily accepted by the prothonotaries at Hoover Reservoir. In fact, our experience here indicates that prothonotary warblers prefer cardboard milk cartons to wooden boxes. The downside to milk cartons is that they are easily ripped apart by squirrels and raccoons, and their useful life is four to six years, whereas wooden boxes frequently survive for over a decade.

TIPS ON NEST BOX PLACEMENT

Make sure your nest boxes are in place well before the breeding season begins, by mid- to late March. Don't be discouraged if the birds do not begin nesting in your box immediately. Sometimes it takes time for the birds to find it. Proper nest site selection requires a bit of effort. Boxes should be set up in groups of four, spread over a potential territory. This will give the birds a choice of boxes, as males will prepare multiple false nests for females to look over. The boxes, each on its own tree or pole, should be placed about 35 feet apart and three to five feet above the high water level. The shape of the wooded area in which they are to be placed should determine the pattern in which the four boxes are arranged. Sites lacking underbrush are preferred; this will reduce the possibility of house wren nesting and predation.

Whether you attach your nest boxes to trees or use PVC pipes placed in the water, be sure your nest boxes are secure enough to withstand high winds and severe weather. Finally, nest boxes should be placed in such a way as to offer southern exposure and weather protection.

PROJECT PARTNERS: CARING AND SHARING

In many ways the future of the prothonotary warbler in Ohio is in our hands. Through conservation of habitat, nesting projects, and the sharing of experiences and techniques, we can achieve additional successes similar to those at Hoover Reservoir. I have given workshops for interested individuals and several county park systems through the Natural Resources section of the Columbus Recreation and Parks Department. I have begun to research data on prothonotary populations throughout the state via the internet, and provide information to many individuals interested in beginning their own nesting projects. I welcome questions and the sharing of information. Finally, the prothonotary warbler is on the Ten Most Wanted list of The Birdhouse Network project of The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, at www.birds.cornell.edu/birdhouse. Their web pages provide information on how to participate in this citizen science work on cavity-nesting birds. ♡

Grouses and little gulls: An Editorial

Some words used for birds seem to defy common sense. Plural formation is a good example. Many people say one robin and two robins, but one teal and two teal. Identical singular and plural bird names commonly used include those of nearly all the ducks, grouse, bobwhite, snipe, killdeer, and woodcock. Why?

You almost never hear passerine birds—flycatchers, thrushes, warblers, finches—treated this way, as “a pair of nuthatch,” or “a thousand swallow.” Many species whose plurals are identical to their singulars are birds that form flocks, and many are fairly large species, but the common thread is something else: they are all game birds. For confirmation, consider the plural forms of these species: “deer,” “fish,” or “moose.” This is the way hunters refer to these animals collectively, and a lot of the rest of us follow suit—understandably so, because so many of those who write about ducks and deer(s) are hunters and use hunters' lingo.

There are exceptions, but many of the names of animals taken as game have identical singulars and plurals. One is tempted to attribute this to an underlying assumption that these animals are somehow not properly regarded as individuals, but rather as undifferentiable flesh, or food—a commodity. Domestic animals regarded as commodities, however—perhaps because we live more closely with them—usually have separate plural forms: cows, pigs, chickens, etc., though we do not have “sheeps.” Many of them have different collective plurals: cattle, swine, fowl, with still other names, usually of quite different origins, for their flesh used as food: beef, veal, pork, lamb, mutton, etc. This is all very complicated, and fascinating to study or speculate about both psychologically and philologically, and English usage continues to evolve with our culture.

Scientists employ useful contrasts between singular and plural forms. Milton Trautman called his work *The Fishes of Ohio* because he treated species separately, reserving “fish” as a collective noun referring to fish of any or many species. This is a useful compromise, but the trend among words for birds—as fewer and fewer species are treated as game or food in English-speaking cultures—is toward standard plural forms. It would be odd to see a modern scientific work entitled “Pheasant of the World,” or “Feeding habits of scoter in Buzzard's Bay.” *The Ohio Cardinal* sides with the scientific trend, saying “teals,” “scaups,” “snipes,” and “killdeers” as plurals, even if they may strike readers as a little strange at first. Your editor, for example, is perfectly at home with all of them except perhaps “grouses,” and he's getting used to that.

While we are talking about usage in the *Cardinal*, it might be time to mention our style as to capitalization of bird names. It puzzles some readers. We do not capitalize bird names, or parts thereof, except as required by standard grammar. Thus, we do not capitalize “gadwall” unless it begins a sentence, or a list entry in column form. We use “Blackburnian warbler” because the first word is derived from a proper name, that of Anna Blackburne, an eighteenth-century English botanist. We avoid “Purple Martin,” its capital letters jarring as “House Cat” or “Dandelion” or “Honey Bee.”

Some have argued that capitalizations are useful in preventing ambiguity. There are actually very few examples among thousands of bird names, but “yellow warbler”

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

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.