

What's In A Name?

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In 1973 many changes were made by the American Ornithologists' Union in the genetic status and, accordingly, in the names of snow geese, flickers, orioles, myrtle/Audubon warblers, and juncos, to name a few. For example, Ohio's Baltimore oriole was combined with the western type, Bullock's oriole, under the label "northern oriole," and became "northern oriole, Baltimore form." Bullock's oriole, incidentally, has never been found in Ohio.

These new titles are undoubtedly accurate and must be used by the museum curator, the teacher, or by anyone producing a scientific paper or similar publication. But they have proved to be a burden and a source of confusion to the field ornithologist, especially if he receives data from several sources.

Field observers make up the vast majority of bird watchers. They gather widespread information on numerical variations, distribution of species, and time of migrations. Because of the huge number of facts accumulated, they must keep methods as simple as possible while still remaining accurate. The use of the new names has caused more work, a loss of important data and a greater possibility of error.

Consider the dark-eyed junco, for instance. This species now includes the white-winged (not found in Ohio, slate-colored, and Oregon. (In 1940, Oregon juncos were named from a combination of Cassiar, intermediate, and Shufeldt's.) An observer has three ways to enter a slate-colored junco:

1. Dark-eyed junco. This would be correct but would be inaccurate reporting because the name would include any of the three forms.
2. Dark-eyed junco, slate-colored form. This is correct but cumbersome. Few birds cards are suitable for this long a name.
3. Slate-colored junco. This is both correct and concise. No one using such an entry could possibly make a mistake or lead a compiler astray. If sub-specific names aren't used, how can we know, for example, the percentage of blue and snow goose color phases, the movements of northern horned larks, and the extent of the invasion of Oregon juncos in our area? We must also be alert to the possible occurrence of the red-shafted flicker, Bullock's oriole, and Audubon's warbler (which has been reported once in the Toledo area).

But it has already become obvious that many birders are using the general titles rather than specific names -- some to avoid the extra effort of entering double names, and others because they believe that, if the AOU proclaims it, it is much more "scientific." Actually, what happens is that an important source of information is being smothered or thrown out of balance, especially if some observers include secondary forms and others do not. I find it very disturbing that the new checklist of the Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge contains only the general name of the forms under discussion and no mention of the sub-specific forms or space in which to write them.

We usually fail to face the fact that the naming of birds does not always follow a consistent pattern. A form may be named after its call; its size; its colors; its feet, legs, wings, or nesting preference; in honor of a scientist, or after the locality where it was first discovered. Vireos are a good example:

red-eyed, solitary, warbling, and Philadelphia. In recent years, many names of world-wide species have been changed to original old-world titles. Bird names in general are simply identification tags. In my personal record-keeping, some names have been changed three times. Revisions have not always been consistent. For instance, in the last flurry, common egret was changed to great egret because no bird should be called "common" because its numbers vary. Yet the tag "common" was applied to a group of flickers in the same report.

In keeping lists simple, it is not that field ornithologists are unscientific. They have always known about binominals and trinominals, about the relationship of numerous forms, for example of Savannah or song sparrows. If they keep lists simple, it is not because they are unaware of fundamentals.

Suppose the blue-winged and golden-winged warblers and their hybrids were treated in the same fashion as the juncos. We have always known the two species were very closely related. Some experts consider them north and south color forms of the same species. If the AOU decides this is the case, then we would describe them as follows:

Buzzing Warbler (my new name)

- Blue-winged phase
- Golden-winged phase
- Lawrence's hybrid
- Brewster's hybrid

Quite a bit to get on a bird card.

And this would be only a beginning. Within a decade, every trinomial would become a double entry. There is talk right now of combining several of the puddle ducks under one head.

There is considerable evidence that many birders are using the double entry names because they fear to be considered unscientific. I hope I have made it clear that they will not only be accurate but much more efficient if they use names which apply directly to the form listed.

We simply must remember that field observations and laboratory and museum studies are two completely different branches of ornithology contributing to each other, and the most efficient recording methods should be used by both.

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