

## History and Tradition, or Contemporary Ornithology? Why Ornithological Journals Should Not Have Bird Names

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Ask any non-ornithologist to predict the prestige of the following journals, based on the name alone: *American Birds*, *Auk*, *Bluebird*, *Condor*, *Emu*, *Forktail*, *Gerfaut*, *Ibis*, *Journal of Avian Biology*, and *Journal of Field Ornithology*. The results always will be that the first one and the last two are placed in one category, and the blizzard of bird-named journals in another, lower category. When that same non-ornithologist is called upon to evaluate the publication records of ornithologists, those with important papers in bird-named journals likely will suffer lower rankings. If lucky, an ornithologist under review will receive support from an internationally distinguished ornithological colleague who will take explicit pains to argue that publication in *The Auk* is a meritorious professional accomplishment. Such arguments, however, may not counteract the damage of a single referee's sneering at the names of the journals in which a bird biologist has chosen to publish. One cannot overstate the importance of the serendipitous collection of peer reviews that determines whether ornithologists get and then keep their first academic jobs, receive tenure, are promoted, are evaluated fairly, and, most important, achieve and maintain the respect of colleagues in other biological disciplines.

We do not intend to impugn the thoughtfulness of non-ornithological colleagues—only to explore the complexity of the modern scientific publishing world. We ornithologists are so accustomed to associating the name “*Auk*” with our most prestigious journal that it may be difficult to appreciate the perception of this journal name per se outside of ornithology. To see this point, what if you were asked to evaluate two candidates, one who published in *Fritillary*, *Skipper*, *Swallowtail*, and *Wood Nymph*, contrasted with one who published in *Journal of Lepidopteran Biology* and *Lepidopteran Science*? Would this not bias your evaluation at some level? When evaluating a prospective major professor, graduate student, job candidate, or tenure candidate, would you be more impressed with a reprint from the *Limpet* or the *Journal of Malacology*?

History teaches that it certainly wasn't always so, in the days not so long ago, when journals were few in number and well known, when organismic biology ruled scientific discourse, and when scientists identified first with a taxonomic group and then with a discipline. But in today's academic climate, a young ornithologist could be in trouble if important papers were published in a journal with a name like *The Auk*. Of course, in a perfect world, these non-ornithological evaluators would take the time to find out that *The Auk* is a frequently cited, prestigious journal that publishes critically reviewed research (rather than a journal about aluids). But how long would they remember this fact in today's “sound-bite” era?

Tradition counts for quite a bit in ornithology, and we are fortunate to know and cherish our traditions as some disciplines do not. One of the longest traditions in ornithology is giving bird names to most of its journals. This has been applied nearly uniformly from the most local of newsletters to the most international of journals. Over time, the tradition has resulted in names not only misleading as to a journal's content (where's the “aluid”?), but phenotypically indistinguishable. Such journal names provide no indication of peer-reviewed status, coverage, or conceptual focus. A perusal of 318 journal titles in Allen Press's 1998 “Buyer's Guide” shows that the titles of the journals, from *International Journal of Crashworthiness* to *Headache* to *Music Therapy Perspectives*, unambiguously signal their contents (with the exception of some that use abbreviations) in all but two cases, *Auk* and *Rhodora*. Tradition is important as a guide in avoiding rash change, but it should not become the reason to avoid evolutionary change, especially in a changing environment. Might it not be time to face reality and stop penalizing those who publish in ornithology journals by judiciously renaming those journals at the top of the field to reflect accurately their contents, rather than to perpetuate a tradition from a previous era?

Contemporary ornithologists contribute exciting and vigorous research to most biological disciplines, and they are leaders in several fields. Yet, we face competition from those same disciplines as our younger scientists begin early to focus on interdis-

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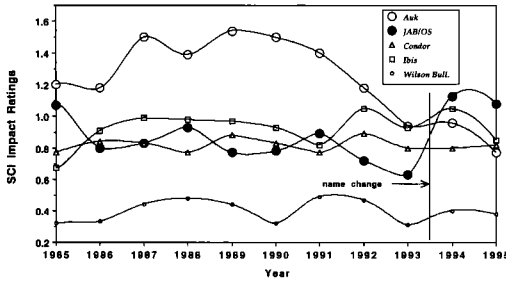


FIG. 1. Trends in journal "impact ratings" in Science Citation Index for five ornithological journals, 1985 to 1995. JAB/OS = *Journal of Avian Biology* and *Ornis Scandinavica*. JAB/OS went from fourth place in 1993 as *Ornis Scandinavica* to first place in 1994 and 1995 as *Journal of Avian Biology*, while ratings for the other four journals remained steady or declined.

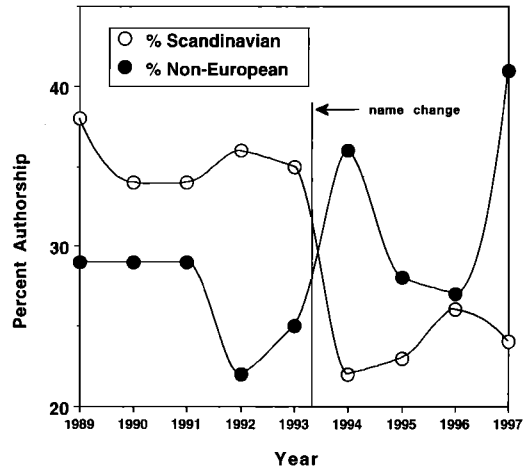


FIG. 2. Proportion of authors in *Ornis Scandinavica* and *Journal of Avian Biology* in two categories of author origin (Scandinavian vs. non-European), 1989 to 1997. The journal name changed from *Ornis Scandinavica* to *Journal of Avian Biology* in 1994 (first issue of 1994 omitted from analysis). Only the first authors of feature papers (vs. Short Communications and Commentaries) were included; issues consisting of symposium proceedings also were omitted. Contributions from non-Scandinavian European authors remained steady during this period.

disciplinary societies and journals that will be considered most positively by their peers. For *The Auk* to be true to its history—to continue its tradition as an outstanding international journal, and to further the cause of contemporary ornithology—it is time to rethink how we package it. In a perfect world, such admittedly cosmetic, superficial changes would be unnecessary, but the accelerating challenges from other disciplines to ornithology, and to organismal biology in general, should compel us to consider bending our traditions in the face of the competitive world of contemporary science.

Nothing is more important to the American Ornithologists' Union than its distinguished journal. Would renaming *The Auk* not be worthwhile if it would encourage submission of important papers, relieve the inhibition of young scientists from publishing excellent work there, and help young scientists identify their careers with the AOU, ornithology, and organismal biology, perhaps in addition to their disciplinary societies?

Some indication of what might happen to the prestige of *The Auk* can be seen in what has happened to citation rates and authorship trends in the journal previously called *Ornis Scandinavica* and renamed *Journal of Avian Biology* in 1994. Although the relationship of citation rates to journal "quality" is open to interpretation, it certainly has found acceptance as an indicator of quality among sociologists studying the sciences, as well as by administrators of academic institutions and research labs. With only two years of post-name-change data, conclusions must be tentative. Nevertheless, impact ratings have increased dramatically following the name change to *Journal of Avian Biology*, whereas those for four other leading bird journals have declined or remained steady during the past 10 years (Fig. 1). Another signal that the change in name may have altered prestige is that the proportion of authors from non-European countries

increased substantially after the name change to *Journal of Avian Biology* (Fig. 2); such internationalization expands the pool of authors and the readership. Although neither analysis provides irrefutable evidence that the name change has increased the prestige of the journal, the results are strongly suggestive.

It is time for AOU members to contemplate carefully our traditions and our future. Our point is not to argue that the name selected for a journal necessarily results in a higher-quality journal. "Quality" is influenced by a number of factors, including the general quality of the research submitted, the thoroughness of the review process, and the competence of the editorial staff. Yet, we argue that the perception of "quality," especially among those outside of our discipline, is influenced by the name a journal carries. Such perception, in fact, may provide a positive feedback loop that ultimately raises the actual quality of the journal as the relative and absolute numbers of high-quality manuscripts submitted increase. This would be healthy for the discipline of ornithology, for the AOU, and for the stature of ornithologists among their colleagues, especially those at the beginning of their careers. We strongly urge members of the AOU to discuss and consider this important issue.