

BOOK REVIEW

Bird is the Word: An Historical Perspective on the Names of North American BirdsReviewed by Nicholas A. Mason^oMuseum of Natural Science and Department of Biological Sciences, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA
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Published April 23, 2021

Bird is the Word: An Historical Perspective on the Names of North American Birds by Gary H. Meiter. 2020. McDonald and Woodward Publishing, Newark, Ohio, USA. 437 pp. \$39.95 (softcover). ISBN 978-1-9357-7842-4.

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet...” (Juliet, in Act 2.2:42–43 of Shakespeare *Romeo and Juliet*)

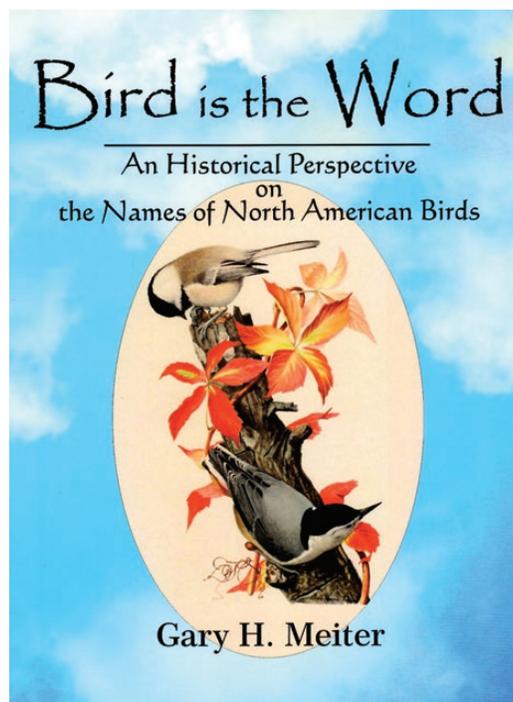
Juliet’s soliloquy suggests a bird is a bird is a bird, regardless of the words we use to describe them. Yet, we know this is not true. Names imbue deeper meaning to the world around us and become inextricably linked to our conceptualizations of people, places, and things. Names are powerful: they can inspire hope or ignite rage, and each name bears a unique history that extends its relevance beyond simply facilitating communication and identification. Bird names are as diverse as birds themselves, with species named after appearances, behaviors, vocalizations, habitats, diet, geographic regions, and people. Names also differ among languages and cultures, representing variation in how different groups of humans communicate about nature. Furthermore, bird names have changed over time as taxonomists have used new information to improve our understanding of species’ limits and relationships. Thus, to study the etymology of bird names is to study the history, biology, geography, culture, and people underlying the names we use to identify our feathered friends.

Gary H. Meiter’s book offers a comprehensive and timely look into the origins and meanings of almost 800 North American bird names. The book is intuitively organized, and begins with an introduction to avian

taxonomy that orients readers to many of the major North American ornithologists of the 19th and 20th centuries. The introduction also describes the rules of zoological nomenclature and the principle of taxonomic priority, and then categorizes the various types of common names among North American birds, such as eponyms, which are honorifics named after people (i.e. Bendire’s Thrasher [*Toxostoma bendirei*]), and tautonyms, in which the genus and specific epithet are identical (i.e. Northern Cardinal [*Cardinalis cardinalis*]). The bulk

of the book is subsequently arranged as a checklist of succinct species accounts that present the English name, the scientific name, the pronunciation of the scientific name, and a brief entry describing the origin of each species’ name. The meaning of the Greek or Latin behind each scientific name is then translated, and is presented alongside the French name, the Spanish name, and any additional names, such as indigenous and colloquial names. Given the colonialism inherent in North American taxonomy, and science more generally, it is commendable that the author provides indigenous names as well. I particularly enjoyed learning that the Hopi name for the Common Poorwill (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) is *holchko*, which translates as “the

sleeping one” and reflects the Hopi understanding of torpor in poorwills—a phenomenon that was completely unknown to “modern” science until much, much later. Species’ accounts are interspersed with classic paintings from famous North American artists, including plates from John James Audubon, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, and Allan C. Brooks. Forty-two sidebars break up the text to present brief anecdotes on a potpourri of topics, from



the Canvasback (*Aythya valisineria*) as an extravagant delicacy of the early 20th century dinner table to an exposé on the “tinkling meteor bursts” (*sensu* Thoreau) and “sound pyrotechnics” (*sensu* Gladden) of the Bobolink’s (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) unique song. Each one is fun and enjoyable in itself, and together in concert, the reader gains a broader appreciation for words, nature, and the history that accompanies them.

The species accounts are followed by appendices, including a list of collective nouns for flocks of birds, a glossary of terms, and short biographies of naturalists mentioned in the book. I am obligated to share a few of my favorite collective nouns—they are just too good: a “chain” of bobolinks, an “exaltation” of larks, an “unkindness” of ravens. Man, those early avian taxonomists must have had a hilarious text thread coming up with those. With all of this material compiled in one place, Meiter’s book nicely complements other references that focus solely on translation and meaning (e.g., Jobling 2009) by providing context and a historical perspective on avian taxonomy that fits nicely on any ornithologist’s coffee table (8.5” × 11” and weighs just under 3 pounds). The book can be easily consumed piecemeal, as I have done by reading a couple entries each day, but also enables deep dives into the labyrinthine history of bird names.

English names are in the spotlight like never before. Last summer, the North American Checklist Committee changed the English name of McCown’s Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mcownii*), which was named after the confederate Army general Captain John P. McCown (Chesser et al. 2021). Other species’ names have also been changed in an effort to make ornithology more inclusive

(e.g., Long-tailed Duck [*Clangula hyemalis*]), and some ornithologists have called for the wholesale retirement of eponyms (i.e. #BirdNamesForBirds). This is an open question and an ongoing debate that will determine how avian taxonomy proceeds and reckons with the checkered past of our nation and colonialism in science. With all this in mind, Meiter’s book is *so* timely, providing insight into the people and history behind North American bird names.

I really like this book and encourage anyone interested in etymology, taxonomy, and birds to pick up a copy. I have enjoyed opening it to a random page and learning something new each time. With props to The Trashmen for “Surfin’ Bird” (The Trashmen 1963), and with particular fondness of Peter Griffin’s rendition of the song in *Family Guy*, I can say without hesitation that everybody who reads Meiter’s wonderful book will know that the bird is the word.

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