

AVIAN NOMENCLATURE

Importance of Research into Names of Birds in Various Languages, Dialects and Cultures

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要 旨

本論文は、日本語とラテン語そしてヨーロッパ諸言語にて異なる鳥の名称とその根拠について考察している。第2章では、筆者の経験からバードウォッチング参加者を観察方法から5つに類別している。続く第3章では、鳥の名称を5つに分類する。その分類は、1) 科学的名称 2) 外見と繁殖地域に基づく名称 3) 外国語からの命名 4) 著名人から名付けられた名称 5) 地域固有や土着の名称となる。最後に、第4章では、英語母語話者が特有の鳥に抱く偏見や信奉を紹介し、その理由を説明する。この研究の目的は、イギリスで親しまれている文化において鳥が特別なものであることを示すことである。

I. Introduction

Bird-watching is for the few. Even though birding (modern name for bird-watching) has its enthusiasts, and the Royal Society for Protection of Birds (RSPB) in Britain is claimed to have over 1,000,000 members, it is clearly a minority interest and most people look on birders with condescension if not pity, calling us “anoraks” or worse names than that. A recent Hollywood movie *The Big Year* (2011) aimed to make birding more popular or at least make people more informed about it, but in fact made it seem a ridiculous pastime. It would be no easy task to convert anyone to love birding, rather like a Christian missionary in 19th century China, making his life among the people and trying to persuade them of the Truth. Sometimes they spent their whole life there

and succeeded in converting only a handful of Chinese people. In contrast this article is not aiming to convert anybody.

This article is a study of avian nomenclature, or birds' names, less from a biological point of view and more from a sociological point of view. "What's in a name? That which we call a rose, By any other name would smell as sweet," says Juliet in *Romeo & Juliet* Act II scene 2 line 43. We will argue that a Rose-finch/*Roodmus/Roselin Cramoisy/Karmingimpel/Rosenfink/Benimashiko* by any other name would sing as sweet, and consider the different names as well as the groups of people that name them, and the reasons for those names. Some names are amusing, striking or otherwise memorable, or carry extra associations with them, embedded as they are in popular culture.

Chapter II will summarise the present author's birding history and compare various subdivisions of birders, such as loners, twitchers, team players, patchworkers and Big Year challengers. Chapter III will cover the various forms of bird nomenclature: first the all-important Linnean System, then birds that are named for their appearance, colour or associated places. Many birds have English names commemorating great people, and a few examples are covered in detail. Dialect and vernacular names are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter IV will consider birds in metaphor and popular culture. Even people who know little about birds have picked up the associations of wisdom, foolishness, greed and vanity that are linked with various birds in English. The final section is a light look at the possible use of bird names as insults and Chapter V forms the conclusion.

II. Good birding!

1. Beginning interest

Some birders can remember the particular bird, place or moment that turned them into birders, when the scales fell from their eyes like Saul's experience on the road to Damascus. He had been a vigorous and conscientious harrier of Christians, until the moment when our Lord addressed him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" After that he became one of the most fervent apostles of Christ. Some birders remember a moment like that, but with the present writer it was more gradual. Family holidays year after year on the same part of the Welsh coast introduced me to the birds of that particular habitat, and I learnt to recognize them and even learn some of their names in Welsh and English. *Cigfran* (Raven, lit=butcher crow, *Corvus corax*) is familiar there and *Bran coesgoth* (Chough, lit=red-legged crow, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) is the star species.

2. Developing passion

After moving to Japan in 1989, I found about a third of the bird species here were familiar to me and about two-thirds were new, but many of the new ones had similarities with an equivalent British species. For example *suzume* (Eurasian Tree Sparrow), the common, friendly, cheerful, ubiquitous bird of Japan is equivalent to the House Sparrow of Britain. It fills the same role in people's lives, nesting in the eaves and seeming to accept or enjoy living close to human beings, unlike most other birds. I joined a couple of birding groups commanded by the naturalist and writer Dr Mark Brazil, to search for winter birds in Hokkaido and Kyushu respectively, and enjoyed the camaraderie among birders, as well as having my first view of a whole lot of birds, ranging from majestic *owashi* (Steller's Sea Eagle) in Hokkaido to elegant *nabezuru* (Hooded Crane) in southern Kyushu. Since then I have been out birding regularly, both with friends and alone, and gradually improved my knowledge. With friends you see more species, as four eyes are better than two, and naturally six are better than four, and you enjoy competing with them as to who can see things first; alone you have the challenge of spotting and identifying things by yourself, which takes more time and results in fewer species but can be the most satisfying of all.

3. Different members of the tribe

As described above, "Team players" and "loners" are two overlapping subdivisions of birders, but there are plenty of others. "Listers" find it essential to jot down day lists, year lists, county lists, country lists or even life lists of bird species they see. This is a civilized advance: in earlier times they would have physically collected the eggs or shot down any rare bird they saw as a trophy, justifying it with the saying, "What's hit is history, what's missed is mystery." Now they just write names down in check-lists. This group overlaps with the two subdivisions previously mentioned, and the present writer confesses to being in this group as well.

"Twitchers", a word which to the uninitiated is simply a synonym for "birders", are a specialist group who are only interested in extreme rarities. Possibly they have already seen all the more common birds in a country, so when a rare bird is reported, often blown in by a typhoon or other extreme weather, the twitcher calls in sick to his workplace, packs plenty of money and a couple of sandwiches, travels as soon as possible by whatever means is possible to the place and stays there as long as necessary to see the rare bird. Of course he wants to photograph it too, since this is the only way to prove he saw the bird and it really is what he thinks it is. The camera has definitely replaced the shotgun for this purpose, despite the great achievements of men like John James Audubon (1785–1851), who shot first and made beautiful, intricate, colourful

drawings later.

“Patchworkers” are another subspecies: they prefer to visit the same area (a patch of ground they possessively call ‘my local patch’) regularly, perhaps several times a week, perhaps in every season of the year, so they learn what species to expect and when and where, and they are alert to notice any changes. According to Moss (2006):

“Every birder needs a place they can call their own: somewhere they can visit on a regular basis and get to know the local birdlife.... The best way to describe a birder’s relationship with a local patch is that the more you go, the more you want to return. Somehow the very act of getting to know somewhere and its birds in minute detail reinforces the pleasure and interest you derive from each visit.”

“Big Year challengers” are those who set themselves the task of seeing as many species as possible between the small hours of 1st Jan and midnight 31st Dec, either in one area or in one country. This may involve a lot of travelling, since different places are good in different seasons, migrating birds in spring and autumn fly on known routes, and a Big Year challenger may have to cross the whole country to see a vagrant bird that is not already on the list. The movie *The Big Year* (2011) depicts three men competing to see as many species as possible in the USA. They all have to travel at great expense to the Aleutian Islands, since only there can they tick off certain Palearctic species on American soil, birds such as Black-eared Kite (*Milvus migrans*, scavenger of the East) which may be familiar in Japan but would be extra special to find in the USA.

III. Nomenclature of Birds

1. Latin names by the Linnean Classification

According to the International Ornithological Conference (I.O.C.) there are currently 10,451 species of bird extant in the world, although this number is frequently adjusted as new species are discovered or known species are reclassified: sometimes two species are lumped together as one, but more often two subspecies of the same bird are split and recognized as separate species, perhaps based on new DNA evidence. Each species has a unique Latin two-name word on the system devised by Carl von Linne (1707–1778), the great Swedish naturalist. He of course is the man who classified the three kingdoms of animals, vegetables and minerals according to certain characteristics. This is useful where several vernacular names have been applied to one bird, or indeed when the same vernacular word has been used for two different birds. For example the name “Moorcock” has been applied to both Red Grouse and Black Grouse on different

occasions, but these species are clearly distinguished by their Latin names. It is also useful when birders from different language backgrounds are comparing notes.

Sometimes the names are amusing: for example *Strouthio camelus* (lit=sparrow camel) designating the Ostrich (*dacho*), gives a vivid image of a fantastic creature, and helps us understand how strange the bird must have seemed to early travellers. To indicate subspecies a third name is added to the basic binomial: for example *Troglodytes troglodytes* is the species we call Wren, whereas *Troglodytes troglodytes hebridensis* designates the subspecies that is found only on the Hebrides islands of Scotland. The Little Auk is a small seabird that breeds in huge numbers north of the Arctic Circle. According to Cocker and Mabey (2005):

“The scientific name of the nominate race is *Alle alle alle*, deriving from the Latin for a great toe *allex*, the ‘x’ being omitted to designate that the hind toe is missing on the bird itself.”

Does this not show an ornithological sense of humour?

2. Names by behaviour, physical features or place

Warblers and Spider-hunters, Wagtails and Flower-peckers are all examples of birds named for their typical behaviour. The Japanese name for Terns, *ajisashi*, (lit=stabbers of horse mackerel) is a fine description of behaviour, and the German *Fliegenschnapper* (lit=snapper of flies) is another. The Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*) is called “Goatsucker” in American English, reflecting both its Latin name and the legend that while flying about at night it feeds on milk from any pastured nanny-goat.

Golden Oriole and Shoebill, Red-eyed Vireo and Blue-eared Motmot are all examples of physical features emphasized in bird names. The Brown-eared Bulbul, that one sees and hears daily in Japan, is a familiar example. It has no external ears, of course, but the name comes from the crescent-shaped chestnut patches on the sides of its shaggy unkempt head.

Daurian Redstart, Tennessee Warbler and Dalmation Pelican are examples of names incorporating places, but some places are more evocative than others. Siberian Rubythroat seems to me a name hard to beat, and there is a sense of privilege to see and hear these almost hand-painted birds in May, migrating through Japan en route to their northern breeding-grounds.

3. Names transferred from other tongues

It is often said that “penguin” derives from the Welsh *pengwyn* (lit=white head), but

the obvious objections that a) there are no penguins in Wales and b) penguins generally have black heads seem to make this absurd. Further investigation, however, shows that the name *pengwyn* might originally have been applied to a flightless North Atlantic bird the Great Auk, which had big white patches on its head but was, alas, hunted to extinction by 1852. The name was then transferred to the flightless Antarctic birds we now call penguins.

Other foreign names are more straightforward: budgerigar, cassowary, currawong and emu are Australian birds that carry Australian aboriginal names. The Mugimaki Flycatcher is the English name, borrowed from Japanese, for a bird that is often seen in the season of *mugimaki* (lit=harvesting barley). The magnificent Lammergeier (lit=lamb vulture) takes its name from German; although there is an English equivalent, Bearded Vulture, the beard is hard to distinguish and the German name is usually preferred.

4. Names commemorating great people

Some 25 years ago I travelled in Zaskar and Ladakh with a German diplomat called Arne von Kittlitz, and wondered if he had any connection with Kittlitz's Woodpigeon (*Columba versicolor*), also known as the Bonin Fruit Pigeon. It turned out that Arne is the great-great-nephew of Friedrich von Kittlitz (1799–1874), the German artist, explorer and ornithologist after whom six species of bird are named, including the pigeon that he had seen on the Ogasawara Islands and described in 1832 in scientific detail.

That triggered my interest in birds named after people, and it turns out there are several hundred of them in total. One might assume they are all named after the famous ornithologist who discovered them, such as John James Audubon (1785–1851): many are, but many are not. Instead some are named after a monarch or a patron, and some to commemorate another naturalist, an illustrator, a wife or a friend. According to Beolens and Watkins (2003), the first person to collect a specimen of a new species (nearly always dead), or the first to describe a new specimen in scientific detail, had the right to name it as he chose. To finance their scientific expeditions to collect new species, collectors often had to send back and sell bird skins and other specimens to men like John Gould, the great British ornithologist, taxidermist and bird illustrator, and were somewhat dependent on his favour. Small wonder that Gould himself has 24 species named after him, his wife is remembered by Mrs Gould's Sunbird, and a finch he personally discovered in Australia, believed to be the most beautiful finch in the world, was named by him the Lady Gouldian Finch!

John Gould (1804–1881) became so important in 19th century ornithology that he was known around the world as the Bird Man. “He was employed as a taxidermist by

the newly formed Zoological Society of London and travelled widely in Europe, Asia and Australia. He was arguably the greatest and certainly the most prolific publisher and original author of ornithological works in the world. From 1830 to 1881 in excess of 46 volumes of reference work were produced by him in colour. He published 41 works on birds, with 2,999 remarkably accurate illustrations by a team of artists including his wife. His first book, on Himalayan birds, was based on skins shipped to London, but later in his career he travelled to see birds in their natural habitats.” (Beolens and Watkins, 2003)

Five birds have been selected as a sample of the many hundreds named after people, and the first of these is Ijima’s Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus ijimae*) named after I.Ijima (1861–1921), Professor of Zoology at Tokyo University and first president of the Ornithological Society of Japan. The bird was first described by the Norwegian Dr Leonhard Stejneger, of Stejneger’s Petrel fame. I myself have searched for this *Phylloscopus* (lit=leaf-peeper) in its Izu Islands habitat, but so far in vain. A second visit in the breeding season is required.

Swinhoe’s Egret (*Egretta eulophotes*), along with a dozen other Chinese birds, is named after Robert Swinhoe (1836–1877) who worked for 19 years as a British diplomat in China. He explored a vast area that had not been open to any other collector, and as a result discovered over 200 new species, mostly birds but also new species of mammals, fish and insects. Having brought these specimens back to Britain, he wanted them to be included in John Gould’s fine work *The Birds of Asia* which was then in progress. In negotiation with Gould, he had to agree that most of the species would be named after other people, although the most important new discoveries were named after him. Swinhoe’s Red-tailed Robin (*Luscinia sibilans*) is a rare vagrant to Japan, but I have seen it three times on the remote Korean island of Socheongdo, and I still remember my excitement at a) adding a rather special bird to my lifetime list and b) feeling a bond, however tenuous, with the great Robert Swinhoe.

Lear’s Macaw (*Anodorhynchus leari*) is a threatened bird that is found nesting in colonies on the sandstone cliffs of Bahia in N.E.Brazil. It was described by Charles Bonaparte, nephew of the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, and is the only bird to bear the name of Edward Lear (1812–1888), the poet and traveller, writer of limericks and nonsense verse such as *The Owl and the Pussycat* and *The Pobble who has No Toes*. One might wonder about the connection between serious ornithology and a nonsense writer, but in fact Edward Lear was also a talented illustrator of birds who worked on *Illustrations of the Family of Psittacidae or Parrots* and also illustrated other publications of his period, including John Gould’s *The Birds of Europe*. It was for this talent and not for his limericks that he was honoured by having a bird named after

him.

Darwin's Cactus Finch (*Geospiza scandens*) was one of 13 finch species found on the Galapagos Islands by Charles Darwin (1809–1892). They live in different areas or on different islands, feed on different things and have significant differences between them, such as bill shape and size, which helped him to develop his famous theory to explain the way in which specialization occurs. “I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term Natural Selection” (*Origin of Species*, 1859). Darwin has a total of 21 birds named after him, the second highest total after Gould, partly showing the respect in which he was held by his contemporaries. It may also be explained by the fact that the 13 Galapagos finch species, while probably sharing the same common ancestors from the mainland of South America, had developed different bill shapes and feeding styles depending on various factors including physical conditions and available fodder, and so helped him develop his famous theory of Natural Selection.

Blakiston's Fish Owl (*Ketupa blakistoni*), or *shimafukuro* in Japanese, is a huge and impressive owl. There are thought to be just 80–100 individuals still living in Hokkaido, of which around 20 pairs breed every year. That day in Golden Week 2011 when I first saw one was a red-letter day for me, and the evening duet when male and female sat beside one another on a branch and boomed out their love-song together is unforgettable. Thomas Blakiston (1832–1891) was a British businessman who worked in Japan for 23 years, while spending his free time on his hobby of ornithology. He catalogued the birds of northern Japan and “preserved many bird specimens, 1,331 of which are now in the museum attached to the Agricultural Department of Hokkaido University... Blakiston was the first person to establish that animals in Hokkaido, Japan's northern island, have northern Asian affinities and differ in appearance from those in Honshu. As a result of Blakiston's work, the Tsugaru Strait, which divides Hokkaido from Honshu, became known as an important zoogeographical boundary: the ‘Blakiston Line’” (Beolens and Watkins 2003)

It has been hard, very hard, to limit this sample to just five species named after distinguished men and women. Birds such as Lulu's Tody-Tyrant, Steller's Sea Eagle, Przewalski's Parrotbill and Wallace's Bird-of-Paradise all demand to be included, but in the end the writer has decided to select a few of special significance to him and to all birders in Japan and leave the others for a later, more detailed article.

5. Dialect names, local names and vernacular names

Birding in Japan requires one to learn Japanese names for each species, in order to share information and sightings with other birders, and where that name is shorter and

neater, we may use it in English as well. For example *keri* and *daizen* are quicker to say or write than “Grey-headed Lapwing” and “Black-bellied Plover”, and so they may be preferred to the cumbersome English phrase.

Regional dialects often have different names for the same bird, which may reflect the call, colour or behaviour of the bird, and it seems interesting to collect some of these. Minority languages in Britain such as Welsh and Scottish Gaelic are very different from English, but both being cognate languages in the Celtic group they sometimes have similar names to each other to describe the same birds. This section will now consider and compare some of these dialect names.

My favourite bird is the tall and powerful *aosagi* which in Gaelic is called *corra glas* (lit=blue heron) and in Welsh has the similar name *greyr glas* (lit=blue heron), but is called Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) in both English and Latin. According to Cocker and Mabey (2005), its vernacular names include Frank (mainly northern England), Harnser, Old Frank (East Anglia), Johnny Crane (Lancashire), Hegri, Haigrie (Shetland), Heronshaw (Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire), Norry-the-bogs (County Kerry, Ireland) and Julie-the-bogs (County Cork, Ireland), the first of which comes from its alarm call. A former warden of Cley, the well-known Norfolk nature reserve, uttered the memorable words:

“The Harnser he goes ‘Frank!’ but the Night-heron he do go ‘Quark!’”

The Grey Heron’s range is right across the Palearctic, making it common in both Britain and Japan, and it is both tall and conspicuous. It fishes on the foreshore or in shallow water along a stream, sometimes searching vigorously, more often standing motionless on the bank waiting for an incautious fish or water-vole to swim into the target area. In hard times herons may raid commercial fish-farms or carp-ponds and be persecuted for it, but usually they are tolerated and respected by other less skilled fishermen.

The second bird has striking black-and-white plumage and a reputation for cheerfulness, stealing and prophecy. This is the Magpie (*Pica pica*) or *kasasagi*, referred to by Shakespeare as “maggot-pie” (*Macbeth* Act IV Sc 3). Since the bird often feeds on roadkill or other fly-blown carrion, one can easily make a connection with maggots, but “in fact the name has more tender connotations. The first element is a contraction of ‘Margaret’ or ‘Margot the Pye’ borrowed from a French equivalent ‘Margot la pie’” (Cocker and Mabey 2005). Other vernacular names include Maggy and, in the West Riding of Yorkshire, Pyenot/Pyenate/Pianate from a northern dialect name dating back to the sixteenth century. “Pied” of course means black-and-white

and the second element is ‘Annot’, a pet name of the name Agnes. The French call it *pie bavarde* (=chattering magpie) on account of its vocal ability. It used to be kept as a pet, both for its intelligence and sense of fun and for its ability to imitate sounds, words and even whole sentences. In Japan the Magpie is curiously localised, being common in Saga-ken (Kyushu) and in a small area near Tomakomai (Hokkaido), and one theory is that these are feral populations that began with escaped pet birds. The Welsh name *pioden* and the Gaelic name *pioghaid* both begin with the pi- element, which may show the pervasive influence of Norman French on the Celtic languages of Britain or may hark back to an earlier Indo-European root.

Thirdly, let us consider the bird the Welsh call *pioden y mor* (lit=magpie of the sea) and the Swedes call *strandskata* (lit=beach magpie), another striking black-and-white bird with blood-red bill and pink legs, the Eurasian Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*). Although only a vagrant in Japan, it breeds in Scotland and is common on mud-flats and rocky shores all around Europe. The French call it *huitrier pie* and one of the vernacular Gaelic names is a charming phrase meaning “St Bridget’s boys”. Oystercatchers eat cockles, mussels and earthworms, but seldom eat oysters, so the normal English name is the least appropriate. Most of the vernacular names reflect its loud cheeping call or its black-and-white uniform: it is called oik, kleeper (northern England); shelder, shelter, sheldro, chalder, cholder, cholard, skeldro, Scottie (Orkney);shalder (Shetland). These shalder-type words derive from the Old Norse word *tjaldur* and compare with modern Icelandic *tjaldur* and Norwegian *tjeld*.

Next comes *iolaire suil na greine* (lit=eagle with the sunlit eye, Gaelic), the largest European raptor, the White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*). In northern Japan this bird (*ojirowashi*) is widespread, but in Britain it was exterminated in the 1920s, mainly because it was thought to kill lambs. As Love (1983) explains, it has been the subject of a slow and careful reintroduction scheme over the last 30 years, starting from the small island of Rhum in the Scottish Hebrides. Wild birds were captured in Norway and carefully released over a 10-year period from 1975–1985. The first British-born chicks were reared in 1985, since when there has been successful breeding every year until now a small population is established on the islands of Rhum, Skye and Mull and on the nearby Scottish mainland. In the past these eagles seem to have lived in wooded parts of southern England as well. According to Cocker and Mabey (2005), “The Anglo-Saxon word for eagle was *erne* or *earne* and Margaret Gelling has examined 30 place names in 14 English counties that contain an “eagle” element ... such as *earn-leah* an Old English word for “eagle wood” (e.g. Arley, Cheshire; Early, Berkshire; and Earnley, Sussex); *earn-wudu* (e.g. Arnewood, Hampshire; and Earnwood, Shropshire) and *earn-clif* (e.g. Arncliffe and Yarncliffe, West Yorkshire).” All these place-names

suggest that White-tailed Eagles were once widespread over Britain, in times when man had made less impact on his environment. As well as eating fish, water-birds and dead lambs, these eagles had another favourite diet: Love (1983) quotes evidence from the Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* celebrating King Athelstan's victory over the Scots in A.D. 937.

“[The Anglo-Saxons] ... left behind them
The black-coated raven, horny-beaked, to enjoy the carrion,
And the grey-coated eagle, white-tailed,
To have his will of the corpses.”

Finally, after one of the biggest birds, let us consider one of the smallest, the Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*), *misosazai* in Japanese, *zaunkoenig* (lit=king of the fence) in German, *troglodyte mignon* (lit=sweet little cave-dweller) in French, *dreathan-donn* in Gaelic or *dryw* in Welsh. Some of these names emphasize its dark-brown plumage, others its secretive nature, since the original troglodytes were Ethiopian cave-dwellers. The Welsh name sounds like “druid,” which might suggest a religious connection in Celtic times. “Jenny Wren” is the common vernacular name, which goes well with its perky appearance, short cocked tail and active feeding habits. An Irish Gaelic name from County Cork is translated “Little brother of the mouse,” which suits well its small size and mouse-like creeping behaviour, low down in a hedge or waterside vegetation. Despite being seen less often than larger, noisier birds, the Wren is actually the commonest British bird, with around 10 million pairs breeding every year in Britain and Ireland, and as many as 40 subspecies spread over many countries.

IV. Birds in Metaphor and Popular Culture

1. Wise and foolish birds

Most people nowadays don't know much about birds or spend time in observing them or learning about them, and yet the English language is full of mention of birds as clichés and symbols, some dating back many centuries. Before the Industrial Revolution, when more British people lived in the country and knew about country matters, people would have been more familiar with birds and their habits, and so our popular culture is full of opinions, beliefs and prejudices about birds. This chapter will explore a few of those beliefs.

One bird reputed to be wise is the owl. This may be connected with its appearance

(the motionless pose, round facial disc and huge unblinking eyes just look wise) or the fact that in Greek mythology it was sacred to Athena, goddess of wisdom. Certainly in A.A.Milne stories the owl character Owl is the most sensible and mature of all Winnie the Pooh's little friends, and "as wise as an owl" is a well-known English cliché.

By contrast, there are various birds reputed, whether fairly or unfairly, to be foolish. "You silly goose!" is a common if dated expression, and the whole genus Sulidae (including Boobies and Gannets) have somehow acquired the image of being stupid. Booby-traps, booby-prizes and "Don't be a booby!" all derive from this image, and the French and German names for Gannet, *Fou de Bassan* and *Basstoepel* respectively, both describe the bird as a fool. Maybe this is because when they land on the deck of a ship they are transformed from masters of the air into comical, stumbling creatures, their legs not being well designed for walking. Or maybe it is because young birds which have fattened up but not quite learnt to fly can easily be caught by hand at their nesting colonies and killed for the pot. Similarly, the word *ahodori* (Short-tailed Albatross/Steller's Albatross) is used in Japanese to mean "fool", perhaps because in centuries past, when millions of them used to breed on Torishima in the Izu Islands, it was so easy to go ashore and kill them for their meat and feathers. Several other species of albatross are known as "mollymawks", a word which originally derives from the Dutch words *malle* (=foolish) and *mok* (=gull).

Not only huge sea-birds are reputed foolish. According to Brewer's (1999):

"'Pigeon' is slang for a dupe, an easily gullible person, a gull. Pigeons are very easily caught by snares, and in the sporting world rogues and their dupes are called 'rooks and pigeons'".

A phrase such as "a pigeon ready for plucking" can be used for such a naive person. The expression "running around like a headless chicken" refers to someone in a panic, unplanned, hasty and ineffective. Anyone who has farmyard experience and has seen chickens being killed and continuing to leap randomly around after death, will totally understand this image.

2. Brave and cowardly birds

Fighting-cocks in Shakespeare's time were bred to be brave and to fight their rivals in cockpits until one or other was dead, giving rise to the phrase "as game as a fighting-cock". By contrast there are far more references to cowardly birds: to call someone "chicken-hearted" or "pigeon-livered" have long been insults, and American children today dare each other to do dangerous things like running across busy roads

by accusations of “Chicken!”

3. Vain and greedy birds

The male peacock, with his gleaming blue/green neck and breast and magnificent tail, is understandably a symbol of male vanity, as in the phrase “proud as a peacock”, but he is not the only vain bird. Brewer’s (1999) gives another example:

“Popinjay (Spanish *papagayo* from Arabic *babagha*) An old word for a parrot, and hence a conceited or empty-headed fop”.

Europe’s answer to the albatross, the magnificent Northern Gannet (*Sula Bassana*), has a 1.8 metre wing-span and gleaming white plumage, with black wing-tips and a yellow crown, and should be a symbol of beauty. However, in French and German it is called a fool (see above) and the British use it as a symbol of greed. In schools or in the armed services, anyone who eats too much or too fast risks the accusation of “You gannet!”

4. Attractive and unattractive birds

“Her eyes they shone like diamonds, Her neck it was just like a swan...”

These lines from the Irish folk song *Black Velvet Band* typify the swan as a symbol of whiteness and beauty, and raven-black hair is another symbol of beauty. The Song of Solomon includes the praise, “Thou hast dove’s eyes”, and John Betjeman writes about his tennis-playing heroine in the poem *A Subaltern’s Love-song* as follows:

“Love 30! Love 40! Oh weakness of joy,
The speed of a swallow, the grace of a boy;
With carefulest carelessness gaily you won,
I am weak from your loveliness, Joan Hunter-Dunn.”

Here we see the swallow used as a symbol of swift, effortless feminine movement. Masculine charm can be expressed by likening to a hawk or eagle. “Hawk-faced” or “hawk-eyed” describe a handsome man of action, and his strong, noble profile can be called “aquiline.”

There are fewer examples of unattractive birds, but “pigeon-toed” and “pigeon-breasted” are bad things to be called, since the first implies that you walk with feet

pointing in towards each other, and the second refers to a deformity in which the chest is laterally constricted so that the sternum is thrust forward. In addition a man who is puffed up and red-faced with rage can be described as “a turkey-cock”.

5. Bird names as insults

It is a little depressing to realise how small is the number of insults in daily use in English. Many people swear, hoping to give emphasis to their words, or express annoyance with other people, or their present situation, or to give vent to their own frustration, but they nearly always use the same six or seven expressions over and over again. Any Hollywood movie depicting police against criminals will give evidence of this constant repetition of the same old insults.

Some people turn to using a foreign language insult, which both adds variety and softens the blow, since the victim may not understand what it means. Others may turn to the past, using colourful, unusual insults. Shakespeare is a great source for insults, ranging from “arrant knave and coxcomb” to “Thou prick-eared cur of Iceland!” Towards the end of the Scottish play, when Macbeth is desperate, he greets his servant “The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!” which has a satisfying ring to it.

Yet another form of insult is to use bird names that are similar to, but not quite the same as, more common-or-garden insults, and the present author has collected a few of these. To say, “You Ruddy Shelduck!” would be a mild expletive: stronger would be “Tody Motmot!” or “Yellow-bellied Sapsucker!”, and if one felt really angry with someone, how about “You are nothing but a *Turdus obscurus!*” or the shorter and punchier “Penduline Tit!”

V. Conclusion

This short article has not tried to evangelise about the joys of birding, but rather to consider a specialised minor part of the field of ornithology, the nomenclature of birds, and to show how fascinating it can be. Even with this reduced topic we have been selective: we have not written much about taxa, precise breakdown of subspecies or entered the debate about reclassifying certain species based on DNA evidence.

Rather than a scientific approach, we have attempted a liberal arts approach to the classification of birds. During research for this article, all sorts of other tempting alleys opened up before us, and areas such as birds in poetry or mythological birds or folk-tales and superstitions connected with birds had to be rejected in order to keep approximately to the chosen topic for this article. These alleys will be now be explored and researched in depth in order to provide material for further articles in the future.

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