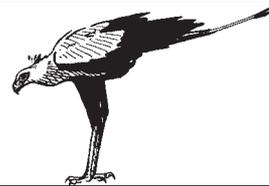




Letters to the Editor



to considerable flux. Genera and species are split or (more rarely) combined, and what had been a fairly stable situation for most groups over many decades is in upheaval. On top of this comes the attempt at a standardised list of English names promoted by the International Ornithological Congress (IOC), enshrined in Gill & Wright (2006)—this despite much apathy or silent opposition from many ornithologists who declined to be part of the initiative. The net result of these two independent but simultaneous processes is that there is unprecedented flux in both English *and* scientific names of birds, tending to cause confusion (and irritation) amongst ordinary birders.

Given that the 'true' name of any taxon is the scientific name, which is subject to both taxonomic fashion and phylogenetic research, to maintain a degree of stability some herpetologists have proposed that split genera should be recognised as full genera, but grouped under their previous umbrella, in the same way that subgenera are sometimes characterised, by using brackets. Thus Sooty Gull *Larus (Ichthyaetus) hemprichi* or White-bellied Black Tit *Parus (Melaniparus) albigularis*. So far, given that *The Birds of Africa* (and thus the ABC checklist) has been fairly conservative, much of this upheaval has escaped the continent and hence this *Bulletin*, but Europe and the Americas are much affected. Where a familiar species has been found to comprise two or more cryptic species one can similarly bracket the old species name, e.g. Madagascar Hoopoe *Upupa (epops) marginata* or the expected African Hoopoe *U. (e.) africana*.

However, the above is just to provide background to the issue of changing English names. A quick glance at Peter Lack's latest

changes in the ABC checklist's preferred names, incorporating the IOC 'international names', many against his own grain as he admits, reveals the scale of mostly arbitrary alterations that have taken place within the ABC area—108 in all. As I noted in reviewing Gill & Wright (*Ibis* 149: 429–431), some of these names are daft. Calling *Foudia madagascariensis* 'Red Fody' instead of Madagascar (Red) Fody is pretty absurd when most male fodies (five of the seven extant species) are red, and when, if it is to be changed at all, there is the French / Creole name Cardinal (hence 'Cardinal Fody') in use throughout its range (except on St. Helena). Why change Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus* to Fork-tailed Swift—it is neither the only swift in the Pacific area, nor the only swift in the world with a forked tail; replacing one inadequate name with another is no improvement! Others are simply banal: Pintado Petrel has long been an attractive alternative to the traditional mariner's name Cape Pigeon for *Daption capense*, but why lose the charm of both with Cape Petrel? In at least one case Lack has defied the IOC, though it's another banal one—Fairy Tern *Gygis alba* becomes White Tern (a long-standing alternative); the IOC invented Angel Tern *de novo*. Some are still behind the times: *Circus maillardi* Madagascar Marsh Harrier becomes Réunion Harrier, but *maillardi* has for some years been generally split from *C. macroscelus*, so whilst the former is indeed the Réunion Harrier, the latter is inevitably again the Madagascar (Marsh) Harrier. The inappropriate retention of 'Marsh' for these birds is purely based on their relationship to Eurasian Marsh Harrier *C. aeruginosus*—they hunt in forests, not marshes.

Name changes

Nigel Collar's letter (*Bull. ABC* 16: 245) raises more issues than he acknowledges. Whilst there is certainly a case to be made for changing some names for conservation purposes, as he suggests, there are also good reasons *not* to change established English names of birds.

In the present flush of taxonomic changes due to DNA phylogenetic research, scientific names are subject





The ABC has always accepted alternative names in the checklist, and I hope will long continue to do so. However, they are relegated to an inferior status in relation to the 'preferred name', even if, as Lack refreshingly states, he is 'well aware that English names in particular are major causes of argument and potentially confusion. Whatever names are chosen will not be liked by everyone'.

My suggestion is to retain an international name, but demote it to a junior partner of local usage. Hence the bird called Rose-ringed Parakeet by the IOC (*Psittacula krameri*) would be cited (pending revision in progress . . .) as Long-tailed Parakeet (Rose-ringed Parakeet) in a paper on West Africa, Ring-necked Parakeet (Rose-ringed Parakeet) in a paper on Mauritius, but simply Rose-ringed Parakeet in South Africa. Thus even if the international name changed (e.g. in the next edition of the IOC list), the local name would not, and continuity would be maintained.

In the case of Collar's *Heteromirafra sidamoensis*, itself a segregate from the former Long-clawed Lark *H. ruddi* (the nominate always Rudd's Lark in South Africa), there is no long tradition of an English name, since the taxon was only described in 1975. Énard made a very reasonable attempt to localise the bird with the scientific name, and it is hardly his fault that all the traditional provinces in Ethiopia (including Sidamo) were abolished in 1996. However, that leads onto another important issue—whether English bird names should slavishly follow changes in

local political nomenclature. I was rather struck when reviewing Gill & Wright that a regrettably ignored Indian contribution to English bird nomenclature submitted to the IOC (Manakadan & Pittie 2002) had retained names using 'Ceylon', whereas the 'politically correct' IOC changed them to 'Sri Lanka'. The IOC was in fact very inconsistent in this process: even 'Abyssinia' survived in at least one name, and Bioko failed to displace Fernando Po in several. In this respect, retaining or adopting a discoverer's name, in this case Erard's Lark (as used by Ash & Atkins 2009), is a safeguard against geographical name changes. The same applies to *Lybius chaplini* also discussed by Collar, who persuaded BirdLife International to change its name from Chaplin's Barbet to Zambian Barbet: Chaplin remains himself—Zambia was Northern Rhodesia earlier in the 20th century, and prior to that was simply a disparate large area with no unified name.

Although there is no real reason why English geographical names should change when local usage does (we don't call Egypt 'el Misr' or India 'Bharat'), there is nonetheless a general tendency to do so, in Africa more than anywhere else. It is very sobering to look at an 1898 map of Africa and hardly recognise any place names or state boundaries—half of today's countries lack names on the map altogether! Politically driven name changes are understandable in relation to colonial names with unfortunate connotations (e.g. Rhodesia), less so where it is possible to separate the political entity from

the geographical place; e.g. the Republic of Burkina Faso occupies the geographical area formerly known in Europe as Upper Volta, Malaŵi the shores of Lake Nyasa. Some name changes are simply revised ways of spelling: Botswana/Bechuana[land], Lesotho/Basuto[land].

In short, we should be very wary of name changes, especially when advanced for sectional interests, and remember that conservation is by no means the only issue to be taken into account when tampering with established nomenclature. Even the conservation issue is not clear cut—the successful rescue of *Psittacula eques* and *Nesoenas mayeri* has been under the banners of Echo Parakeet and Pink Pigeon—no mention of Mauritius, though the IOC stubbornly prefers 'Mauritius Parakeet'.

References

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