

WORDS OF A FEATHER

WILLIAM YOUNG
Arlington, Virginia

Have you ever encountered a white-whiskered hermit or a festive coquette? How about a rifleman or a firewood-gatherer? Have you seen a village weaver or a bearded mountaineer? What about a red-tailed comet or a shining sunbeam? If you answered in the affirmative to any of these questions, you are probably a birdwatcher, because these are all names of birds from around the world. The common names of birds reflect a use of language almost as colorful as their plumages.

The common (as opposed to the scientific) name of a bird may vary, depending on where you are and when the bird is being seen. For instance, the species called the common loon in North America is called the great northern diver in England. The red phalarope in North America is the gray phalarope in England, because it has red plumage only during breeding season, and the British see this species only in its drab winter plumage. During the past thirty years, the Baltimore oriole has gone from being considered a species to being considered a subspecies of the northern oriole and then back to being considered a full species again.

In some instances, common names are derived from scientific names. Rheas are in the genus *Rhea*. The common name for *Anhinga anhinga* is the anhinga, the only instance in North America of a genus, species and common name being identical. Confusion can arise because birds with similar common names can be from totally different families. Europeans colonizing other continents tended to name birds based on a physical resemblance or similar habits to the birds in Europe. There are birds called flycatchers in the United States, Europe and Australia that are not closely related.

The English names in this article were taken from a list in *The Bird Almanac*, compiled in 1998 by Dr. David M. Bird (which is an aptronym). One can find other vernacular names for many of these species. The America bittern, a shy marsh bird that utters a pump-like call while concealing itself among the reeds with its bill pointing straight up in the air, has a variety of colorful colloquial names, among which are thunder pumper, water-belcher, shitepoke, sky-gazer, bog-trotter, butterbump, mire drum, and barrel-maker. For some species, a colorful colloquial name is used as the common name, as with the bare-faced go-away bird of Africa.

A relationship often exists between colorful plumage and colorful names. One of the largest and most colorful families of birds in the

world is the hummingbirds. These birds have names such as white-necked jacobin, Mexican woodnymph, royal sunangel, empress brilliant, purple-throated mountain-gem, black-tailed trainbearer, coppery metal-tail, green mango, black-thighed puffleg, and purple-crowned fairy. Some of these jewel-like birds have been given the names of jewels, including the ruby-topaz hummingbird, blue-chinned sapphire, golden-crowned emerald, amethyst woodstar, and garnet-throated hummingbird. The hermit, coquette, mountaineer, sunbeam and comet from the first paragraph are all hummers. In addition to the festive coquette, one can also find tufted, frilled, spangled, white-crested and black-crested coquettes.

A larger family of birds with much less colorful plumage is the Tyrannidae, which includes tyrant flycatchers and other species. When birding in Central and South America, one sometimes encounters entire pages in a field guide filled with different species in this family that all look pretty much alike. One tends not to want to devote much energy to tracking down birds with names such as the unadorned flycatcher, drab water-tyrant, grayish mourner or one-colored becard. In Costa Rica, I saw a tiny (albeit friendly) drab bird with the oxymoronic name of paltry tyrannulet. In my travels, I have also seen both the northern and southern beardless-tyrannulet. We all know that the world is filled with tyrants, and representatives from the bird world include the pearly-vented tody-tyrant, agile tit-tyrant, little ground-tyrant, and cock-tailed tyrant (which could be the official bird of Alcoholics Anonymous).

Bird names sometimes lend themselves to anthropomorphized jokes. For instance, in both the avian and human arenas, one might find red-gartered coots, wandering tattlers, cut-throats, noisy miners and red bishops. One can have welcome swallows and familiar chats. On a breezy summer day, one might find a pair of rosy-faced lovebirds flying a white-tailed kite near a waterfall swift. Spectacled monarch describes the aging Queen Elizabeth. Iraq babbler could serve as an apt nickname for Saddam Hussein, as could mustached babbler. Austin Powers might brag about an imperial shag. And let us not omit the most suggestive of birds, the tits. There are great tits, dusky tits, yellow penduline tits, varied tits, fire-capped tits, stripe-breasted tits (which sounds redundant), sombre tits and elegant tits, to name a few.

Many birds have been named for their calls, the obvious examples being whip-poor-wills and killdeers. Others are named for a description of their vocalizations, including northern and southern screamers, snoring rail, rusty whistler, flutist wren, musician wren, bubbling cisticola, siffling cisticola, croaking cisticola, mustached laughing-thrush, and mourning dove. By the way, there is also a mourning warbler which is so named because its plumage suggested mourning attire to ornithologist Alexander Wilson.

The name of at least one bird may come from the way it tastes. Dr. John Dumbacher made national front-page news in 1992 when he report-

ed that the skin and feathers of the hooded pitohui of New Guinea contain a potent steroidal neurotoxin. He made the discovery after he cut his finger while removing one of these birds from a net and then placed the finger in his mouth. Some of the native people in the area are known to hunt and eat virtually any bird they can find, but Dr. Dumbacher discovered that the native people avoid hunting pitohuis. It is probably more than a punny coincidence that a poisonous bird would have a name similar to the sound someone makes when spitting out something distasteful.

A broad range of adjectives appears in bird names. Some birds with curious adjectives in their names are the obscure berrypecker, fearful owl, satanic-eared nightjar, invisible rail, dark changing-goshawk, furtive flycatcher, mysterious starling, cloud-scraping cisticola, strange weaver, and brimstone (or bully) canary. There is a vegetarian finch, but to my knowledge, no carnivorous finch (which is just as well). And there are ground finches that come in small, medium and large. Among bird name adjectives are descriptions of virtually any color in the spectrum. I have seen hepatic tanagers (liver-colored), ferruginous hawks and pygmy-owls (iron-colored), and violaceous euphonias and trogons (violet). In the same family with the violaceous trogon is the resplendent quetzal. Having seen a male in Costa Rica, with its day-glo green and red plumage and two-foot tail plumes, I can assure you that the adjective, if anything, understates the beauty of this bird.

The bird with the most words in its name is the King of Saxony bird of paradise. A lot of neotropical birds from Central and South America have unusually-lengthy names. Among the ovenbirds are the curve-billed reedhaunter, henna-hooded foliage-gleaner, and my favorite, the scaly-throated leaftosser. One can also see hairy-breasted barbets and black-girdled barbets. For people who regard neotropical bird-watching as a religious experience, there are rusty-breasted nunlets and lanceolated monklets.

In *Names*, Paul Dickson talks about the race-horse with the seemingly-innocuous name of Little Lass, which caused problems when said during a race. A bird name which causes a similar problem is an African species called the crab plover. Some bird names are wonderful tongue-twisters. Try saying any of the following ten times quickly: sharp-tailed stream-creeper, spectacled prickletail, lizard buzzard, brown-breasted bulbul, white-bibbed babbler, Bagobo babbler, or pearly-vented tody-tyrant. Bulbuls are one of the groups of birds with repetition in their names. Others are the motmots, caracaras and boubous. In addition to the paltry tyrannulet, oxymoronic bird names include the great shortwing and the Reunion solitaire (named after the island).

Birds have provided a great inspiration to the imaginations of people throughout the world. There are countless ways in which birds enrich our language and other aspects of our lives. I hope that as long a list of living birds will be available to anyone who wants to submit an article to *Word Ways* in 2099!