

## Book review

### LAPWINGS, LOONS & LOUSY JACKS: THE HOW AND WHY OF BIRD NAMES

By Ray Reedman

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The author, Ray Reedman, and I have something in common. We both love words and birds. Reedman has a background in literature and is obviously an avid birdwatcher. My background is as a biologist, albeit one whose main research interest is avian ecology and behaviour, but I wouldn't call myself a birdwatcher; definitely not a twitcher or lister. Both of us also have an interest in bird names. Reedman is interested in the origin of bird names; the naming of birds scientifically and in common language (English and its various forms in particular). My interest in the names of birds is as an essential tool in communicating research results to others (Recher 2017). I am fascinated by the passion that the name of a bird can stir among birdwatchers and ornithologists alike. I am also bemused by the rigidity of the rules of nomenclature as they apply to scientific names and the move to bestow a unique 'English' (and I presume French, Russian, and Tibetan) name on every bird known to science and then some. This includes the current move to uniquely name subspecies of Australian birds (Ehmke *et al.* 2017) regardless of how cumbersome these names become or even whether the subspecies in question can be distinguished in the field. Just wrap your tongue around such proposals as the 'Western Wheatbelt Rufous Fieldwren' or the 'Large-billed Leaf Warbler'.

In 'developments before Linnaeus', Reedman traces the naming of birds back to the Englishman, William Turner, Calvinist and non-conformist, physician and naturalist, who published his *Avium praecipuarum, quarum apud Plinium et Aristotelem mentio est, brevis et succincta historia* in 1544. Turner discussed the principal birds and bird names mentioned by Aristotle and Pliny the Elder, as well as providing accurate descriptions and detailing their natural history from his own studies as an ornithologist. This was the first printed book dealing exclusively with birds ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Turner\\_\(naturalist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Turner_(naturalist)); accessed 14 March 2017). Reedman then describes the evolution of the Linnean system of scientific names, the standard we follow today. Linnaeus first published his *Systema Naturae* in 1734, with 11 subsequent editions embracing most of the natural world, plant and animal. The adoption of a trinomial name for subspecies did not appear until the late 19th Century in America, and in 1901 the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature was established cementing the Linnean system into our lives as biologists and conservationists.

The evolution of English names for birds has been more by chance and narcissism than considered thought. Initially, as Reedman explains, bird names depended on 'time and place', and, I might add, on the persons bestowing the names. That is, they differed regionally and changed through time as first one name than another became fashionable and as the politics of

ornithology shifted. Parochial names are hardly surprising in the time before mass communication and travel and before the 18th Century 'there was no such thing as a 'correct' bird name', including the scientific name. Codification of English names lagged behind scientific names, but with the 16th Century formalising vernacular names became the province of 'ornithologists'. Nonetheless consensus on the English names of birds 'wavered and wobbled', to quote Reedman, through the 20th Century as the British (BOU), American (AOU), and Australian (RAOU) ornithologists unions battled with local preferences and international politics. It was not until 2005 that the International Ornithological Committee (IOC) produced a list of English language names for the world's birds that attempts a 'unique' name for every species and establishes rules for spelling and punctuation. The IOC World Bird List is updated regularly and is now on Version 7.3 (<http://www.worldbird-names.org/> accessed 31 October 2017), with no sign that the chopping and changing of names will ever cease (Recher 2017; Garnett and Christidis 2017).

Reedman's historical account of the evolution and formalization of bird names is only a few pages (pp. 1–13), but is succinct, interesting, and worth reading. This is followed by an equally short (pp. 14–23) and readable account of some curiosities associated with the scientific names of birds. Scientific names, it seems, are not always based on science or even good language. As Reedman says, many are flawed or just simple nonsense suggesting that scientists who name birds 'work with more than their heads', but to Reedman that is the 'charm of the system'. Among the many examples given is the Spotted Pardalote, *Pardalotus punctatus*, a name derived from both the Greek (*pardalotus*) and the Latin (*punctatus*) translating as 'spotted spotted'. Despite writing extensively on this bird, I'd never twigged to this, but it is, as Reedman suggests, a bit 'silly'.

The bulk of the book deals with 'the names and their stories', or how species (and higher taxa) acquired the names we know them by. Reedman explains the evolution of names through time and their linguistic derivations. There is an easy and light-hearted style in his writing and he is adept at pointing out inconsistencies and confusions in the names birds have been given. Exploring the names of one of my favourite groups, herons and egrets (Ardeidae) Reedman recounts some problems he had when first visiting Florida in North America with its many species. The Reddish Egret, *Egretta rufescens*, is dimorphic, with reddish and white individuals; the Little Blue Heron, which is not a heron, *Ardea*, but an egret *E. caerulea*, and has three colour phases beginning life as a pure white juvenile and going through a distinctive pied phase before assuming the dark blue, almost purple, plumage of an adult; and, the Little Green Heron, *Butorides virescens*, which is not green and whose scientific name, *Butorides*, means it resembles a bittern were typical of the confusing names Reedman encountered in Florida.

Reedman is engaging as he combines history and linguistics in describing the origins of names, and mixes these stories with accounts of the confusion created by the names themselves. He does this chapter by chapter, taxon by taxon, with an emphasis on British and European birds and asides to birds on other continents. Avian nomenclature, both English names and

scientific, seems to be in constant state of change and turmoil, if not chaos. Reedman's stories of names recounts this well and anyone interested in achieving a stable nomenclature for communication will find this book justifies concern for the incessant chopping and changing of bird names that seem to have gone on forever. As just one example, and a change in names that annoyed me greatly when the RAOU brought out its List of Recommended English names for Australian birds (RAOU 1978) is that of the Ground Thrush, *Zoothera dauma*, as it was known in CSIRO's list of Australian birds (CSIRO 1969). The persons responsible for the RAOU's list of names decided, contrary to established use and against better advice (Recher and Pyke 2012), that *Zoothera dauma* was 'properly' known as 'White's Thrush', the name the bird was known by in Great Britain, where it was an accidental species. Unfortunately it was subsequently determined that the Australian *Zoothera dauma* was in reality two species, *Z. lunulata* and *Z. heinei*, the Bassian and Russet-tailed Thrushes respectively (Ford 1983; Christidis and Boles 2008). This is one of the few scientifically valid revisions of an Australian bird to take place since I started working on Australian birds in 1967. As Reedman recounts, the confusion of names does not stop there. White's Thrush is now known as *Zoothera aurea*, having been split from *Z. dauma*, now known as the Scaly Thrush, a name previously used in Tasmania for the Ground Thrush. CSIRO (1969) lists no fewer than nine alternative English names for *Zoothera dauma* and eight scientific names, including five different genera. No wonder I was pleased to see the stabilisation of bird names in Australia with the publication of the CSIRO list only to watch it unravel as the RAOU sought to assert its authority to determine the names of Australian birds (Recher 2017).

Persons hoping to find accounts of the politics of bird names in Australia and elsewhere may be disappointed by Reedman's book. Although the politics of names is part and parcel of the history of avian nomenclature, Reedman does not analyse the national and international debates over avian nomenclature in depth. The story is there, just spread out among all the taxa. His account of the derivation and meaning of 'warbler' (pp. 169–179) being a case-in-point.

While the emphasis in Reedman is on the evolution and derivation of British and European bird names, much of this is, of course, relevant to Australia and America given we both speak a version of English. Reedman does, however, conclude his account with a chapter on the names of North American, South American, and Australian bird names. He seems disappointed to find so few names either in the Americas or Australia

that can be traced back to the languages of the first nations. As with British bird names, the great majority of American and Australian bird names have their roots in Europe, with scientific names largely based on Greek and Latin. Many Australian bird names arise from north of the continent, a fact that surprised Reedman; 'drongo' of Malagasy derivation, 'cassowary' may be Malay or Papuan, 'cockatoo' originates from an Indonesian dialect, while the terrible name 'baza' is of Indian or Russian origin. There are Australian bird names with an Aboriginal heritage; 'galah' is a word of the Yuwaalaray people, budgerigar is also Aboriginal, as is 'kookaburra'. I chuckled when I read Reedman's account of the name 'gerygone', which had replaced the name 'warbler' in the RAOU (1978) list for many of the birds I study and write about. Reedman explains that 'gerygone', the genus name elevated to the vernacular by the RAOU, was derived from the Greek, *gérugonus*, meaning 'a song that echoes back'. Leaving it as warbler makes even more sense now.

All up Reedman's book on the 'how and why of bird names' makes for good reading; informative, sassy, and here and there argumentative. Reedman does not refrain from giving his opinion about bird names and this just adds to the spice of the book. Buy it, read it, enjoy it, as I have done.

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