

A Nightingale by any other name? Relations between scientific and vernacular bird naming

A. G. GOSLER^{1*} & C. M. JACKSON-HOULSTON²

¹Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology and Institute of Human Sciences, Oxford University

²Department of English, Drama and Modern Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Oxford Brookes University

*Email: andrew.gosler@zoo.ox.ac.uk

In 2008 the global Human population passed a significant milestone: the majority of people are now considered urban. In the UK, the figure has exceeded 95% for rather longer, passing 70% by 1881. The move from rural to urban involves a fundamental shift from a largely natural or semi-natural environment with many natural and few anthropogenic components, to a largely artificial environment with many anthropogenic and relatively few natural or semi-natural components. The shift has been accompanied by a growing sense of disconnection from, and ignorance about (and even fear of) nature. This trend is of increasing concern for conservation, as we are unlikely to value what is perceived not as familiar and loved, but as unfamiliar, alien or even frightening (Louv 2006, Gosler *et al.* 2012).

The conservation community's response to this declining awareness of nature has been to attempt to engage the public through a largely scientific perception of nature. Two reasons for this are: first, for important operational and historical reasons, this modus operandi reflects the predominant culture of the conservation community itself. Secondly, it is derived from an implicit assumption that disengagement from nature is the norm for the British population, so that engaging people with nature is essentially an educational process, and because contemporary education in the study of nature falls within the scientific study of biology, the engagement process is assumed to require a scientific and, by implication, essentially 'acultural' appreciation of nature. This has raised concerns even within the ornithological community.

The issue is well illustrated by the IOC's introduction of International English names of British birds (Gill & Wright 2006), which the BOU have included in the British List since 1992. Constructed to reflect better the phylogenetic relationships among species, while also attempting to make explicit the wider geographical relationships of British birds, this list has the effect of disconnecting the user further from the birds and their uniquely British ecological and cultural significance. British readers need only to consider such names as Winter Wren, Wood Nuthatch or White-throated Dipper to see why they lack eco-cultural relevance, resonance and traction. The fact that the use of such names would not be appropriate in a domestic British context was well recognized by the BOU, who have maintained two lists of names (e.g. Wren, Nuthatch, Dipper) since 1992, one for international and one for domestic use.

In this paper we argue that the process of engaging people with nature, which the conservation imperative necessitates, is in fact a re-engagement of the population, and that this might be better achieved through a recognition of the cultural significance that nature has traditionally played within British folk culture, in concert

*This paper forms part of the proceedings from the BOU conference **Ecosystem services: do we need birds?**
Other papers from these proceedings can be viewed at www.BOUPROC.net.*

with the inspirational use of accessible scientific information. Through an etymological analysis of 3291 English folk names of 78 passerine species (collated by Desfayes 1998), we demonstrate that the current disengagement, which is considered normal, is a relatively recent development, and that the nineteenth-century population of the UK was not only familiar with nature as part of their everyday culture, but that they possessed a sophisticated knowledge of the ecology and behaviour of wild birds, independently of any scientific (e.g. evolutionary) framework. Perhaps most significantly, analysis of these names reveals an important tendency in the British relationship with nature, which may even shed light on the significant historical role that Britain has played in the foundation of conservation itself. This is that the data lead us to reject the assumption, often repeated uncritically, that laypeople traditionally named only what they hunted or ate. Whilst ethno-biological studies elsewhere have indeed reported (albeit in the broadest sense) on the utility of folk systematics (e.g. Hunn 1982), British folk named, with clear evidence of affection, all birds in their familiar environment.

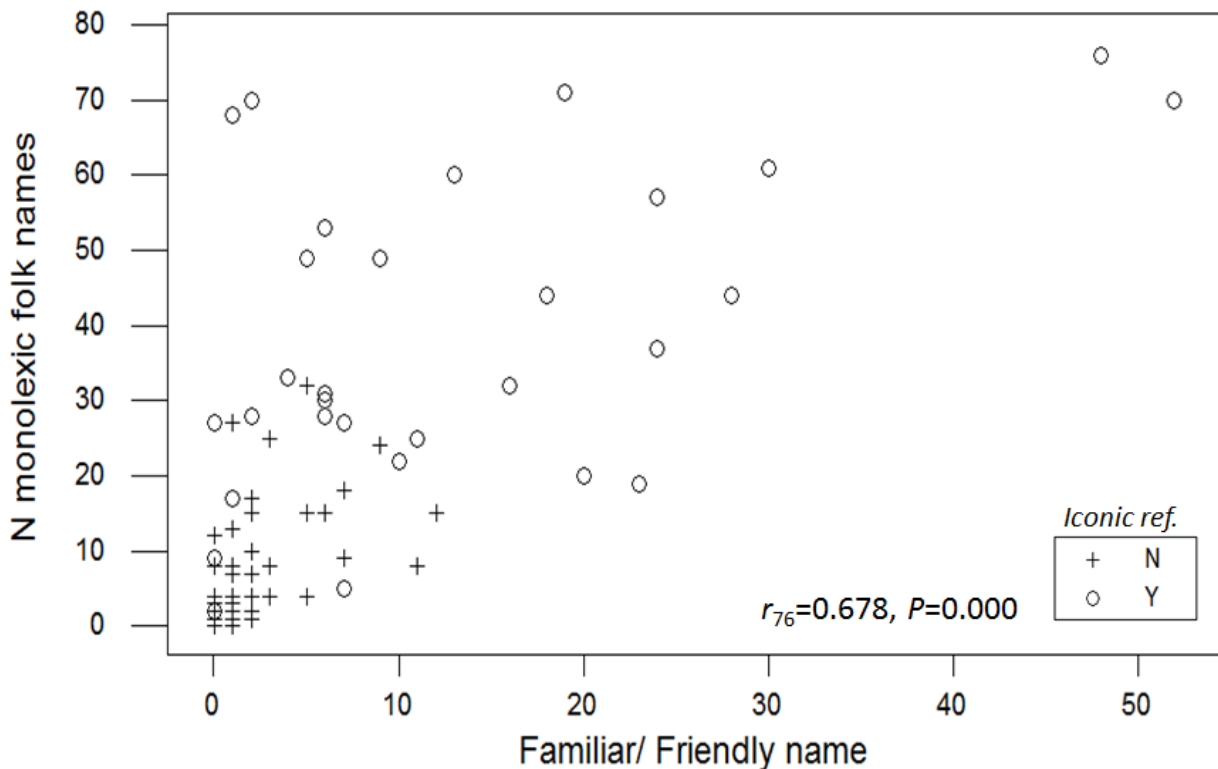


Figure 1. Iconic referent species are regarded with affection. A species was defined as ‘iconic’ if its name was used as a referent in that of another species (e.g. ‘Wren’ in Sally Wren [=Willow Warbler], or ‘Ouzel’ [=Blackbird] in Water Ouzel [=Dipper]) signifying the greater familiarity of the iconic species. Iconic species (open circles) have more ‘affectionate’ names associated with them (i.e. names incorporating a, typically diminutive, first or Christian name [e.g. Jenny, Molly, Polly, Sally, Tommy]), and more often show reduction to a single word (monolexic) name (Robin, Wren, etc.). As affectionate names are typically (and almost by definition) polylexic, these are independent traits.

More familiar species take on iconic status in that they are used as referents in the naming of less familiar species that are reminiscent of the iconic species (e.g. ‘Wren’ in Furze Wren [=Dartford Warbler]). Thirty such ‘iconic’ species are so recognized here. Iconic species show a significant tendency to incorporate an ‘affectionate’ epithet

in the name, which is typically a diminutive (e.g. child's) form of a Christian name (as in Jenny Wren). Independently of this, iconic referent species also show a significant tendency to reduce the name to a single word (monolexic) form (Figure 1). Analysis of the folk names also reveals much about those features of a bird (appearance, voice, context) that capture the human attention, and about the complex cultural processes that have contributed to the naming of birds over centuries. The names are contextual rather than systematic, and reflect a phenetic rather than a phylogenetic perception. These, and other distinctions, indicate a significant mismatch between the natural cultural perception and naming of birds and the scientific systematic perception and nomenclature, a fact which may be significant for the re-engagement process.

We present this new dataset, demonstrate how the process of name standardization has differed from the intuitive folk process of bird naming, and chart the development of vernacular usage through the comparison of three writers from the early nineteenth century to early twentieth centuries (the poet John Clare, and the essayists Richard Jefferies and W. H. Hudson) with appropriate ornithological works. Clare used, but also challenged, a generalist bird book based on outdated sources. He uses more than twice the number of additional names found in the *Natural History of Birds*. We hypothesized that in appealing to a market nostalgic for the countryside the later essayists would record more supposedly 'quaint' and old-fashioned names than serious bird guides of their periods, but this was not the case. Jefferies' records of passerine names in our three sample texts represent a coverage of an extra 62% over and above the names he chooses as standard, whereas Alfred Newton's revision of Yarrell's *A History of British Birds* increases the range by 148% for the same suite of species. For Hudson, and T. A. Coward's *The Birds of the British Isles and Their Eggs*, the figures are 44% and 115%, respectively. However, Newton and Coward use more definite hierarchies of discourse to establish rankings of authority for their names.

Crocker and Mabey's *Birds Britannica* (2005) records the survival of traditional vernacular names for only 34 of the 75 passerines mentioned by Clare, Jefferies and Hudson. We suggest that vernacular bird naming can still be a creative process, but that the presence of the BOU list, essential though it is for scientific ornithology and conservation, induces a culture of authority inimical to the widespread preservation of alternatives, while oral birders' coinings (e.g. 'Commic Tern') operate on a depauperate range of principles.

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