



Emu - Austral Ornithology



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/temu20>

Why Australian common bird names should respond to societal change

Stephen T. Garnett, Golo Maurer & Georgia E. Garrard

To cite this article: Stephen T. Garnett, Golo Maurer & Georgia E. Garrard (2022): Why Australian common bird names should respond to societal change, *Emu - Austral Ornithology*, DOI: [10.1080/01584197.2022.2096074](https://doi.org/10.1080/01584197.2022.2096074)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01584197.2022.2096074>



Published online: 18 Jul 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Why Australian common bird names should respond to societal change

Stephen T. Garnett ^a, Golo Maurer ^{b,c} and Georgia E. Garrard ^d

^aResearch Institute for the Environment and Livelihoods, College of Engineering, IT & Environment, Charles Darwin University, Casuarina, Australia; ^bCollege of Marine & Environmental Sciences and Australian Tropical Herbarium, James Cook University, Nguma-bada Campus, Smithfield, Australia; ^cBirdLife Australia, Melbourne, Australia; ^dOffice for Environmental Programs, School of Ecosystem and Forest Sciences, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

The common names of birds have always been changed to reflect societal trends in language usage. We suggest that guidelines should be developed for assessing the current acceptability of names associated with people from Australia's past, particularly from colonial times.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 February 2022
Accepted 25 June 2022

KEYWORDS

Vernacular; common names; colonial; first nations

Australian ornithology has a long history of revising bird names in ways that reflect contemporary societal views (e.g. RAOU (Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union) 1926; Schodde *et al.* 1977). Changes tend to have been made reluctantly and infrequently – there is value in stability and individuals can develop a deep attachment to vernacular names (Ehmke *et al.* 2017). The time has come, however, for BirdLife Australia to foster debate about how to ensure that Australian bird names, birding and bird conservation are culturally and socially inclusive, and do not cause offence. Here we explore issues that we hope will guide constructive and productive debate leading to the next generation of vernacular names for the Australian avifauna.

Bird names, like all names (Gramsci 1982), inevitably reflect the prevailing power structures and political priorities of the dominant society. This was particularly apparent during colonial expansion from Europe. In naming both the features of 'new' lands and the creatures that lived there, the colonists and the naturalists who accompanied them illustrated their dominance over the societies they colonised. The result for large parts of the world is common names firmly embedded in the 19th century British Empire with common names reflecting experience of English avifauna (Driver and Bond 2021). As a result, despite extraordinary endemism, Australia has a legacy of wrens and robins, magpies and treecreepers named after taxa from the source of imperial power (Fraser and Gray 2013; Driver and Bond 2021). Likewise, topographic epithets, such as Cape Barren Goose and Nullarbor Quail-thrush, reflect colonial geographies. Among the 1692 Australian species and subspecies on the BirdLife Australia Working List V3 (excluding vagrant and

introduced taxa; BirdLife Australia 2019), 18.7% derive from unrelated entities (e.g. shrike-tit that is neither shrike nor tit). Just 82 reflect First Nations names for birds (1.6%) or places (3.3%).

In contrast, 3.8% of taxa are named after colonists (i.e. eponymous) and 13.3% after places named after colonists. Of the 56 people honoured (all but seven being men), most either never visited Australia or did so briefly as maritime explorers or as children. The remainder were honoured because they were naturalists, explorers or a governor or premier of one of the states. Few received their eponym on the basis of ornithological merit. A further 32 pay homage to colonial power structures with words like 'emperor', 'imperial', 'royal', 'monarch', 'king' or 'regent'.

The question we now face, over a fifth of the way through the 21st Century, is whether valorising 19th Century colonial people and imperial structures in bird names can be justified. Colonial histories are often ugly when revisited (Satia 2021). Not only were First Nations names replaced, so too were whole Peoples and their languages (Stegemann 2021). The trope that the imperialists commemorated in names, statues and other celebrations of the colonial past were simply 'men of their time' does not make them men of ours.

For example, explorer Major Thomas Mitchell made significant contributions to the colonial Australian story, but does he really need to be commemorated in the name of one of our loveliest cockatoos, a bird that he encountered only briefly? While he issued a directive to surveyors to use First Nations names where possible (Windsor 2009), Mitchell was involved in an incident at 'Mt Dispersion' during which Kureinji and Barkandji people were shot and killed (Mitchell 1839) and for which he was reprimanded

by the New South Wales Executive Council at the time. Removing Mitchell's name from a cockatoo will not erase him from history where his role as a colonial explorer is firmly recognised. There has also long been an alternative - Pink Cockatoo is increasingly favoured over Major Mitchell's Cockatoo in print and social media.

The argument for changing eponymous names is not just that they are anachronisms. The purpose of names is to communicate important information about the object they describe (Mill 1879). The information in eponymous names conveys little information about the birds to which they are attached but can cause harm and offence (Buchmann and Downs 2018; Driver and Bond 2021). The conservation and nurturing of our magnificent avifauna will require the efforts and co-operation of all Australians, and so their names should not be exclusive or offensive. Just as names associated with many threatened birds worldwide may reduce social support because they evoke negative emotions (Gregg *et al.* 2020), so names with reference to historical figures with tarnished reputations could stand in the way of both local, on-ground action and community support for this work. Acknowledging and repairing the ongoing hurt and alienation caused by such names and all they represent is thus not only a moral obligation but also a conservation imperative.

While revising names is rarely easy, several ornithological organisations have started changing their recommended vernacular names to reflect contemporary social values (Driver and Bond 2021). For example, the American Ornithological Society has consulted widely about procedures for reviewing proposals to change English bird names as part of a process to increase inclusion and diversity in ornithology. As part of this they acknowledge that even long-established names could warrant changing if they 'refer to individuals or cultures who held beliefs or engaged in actions that would be considered offensive or unethical by present-day standards' (American Ornithological Society 2020b). On this basis they changed the recommended name for *Rhynchophanes mccownii* from McCown's to Thick-billed Longspur because of the association between General John McCown and slavery (American Ornithological Society 2020b).

The purpose of this paper is to initiate discussion in Australia of whether bird names should respond to societal trends in a similar manner and to raise some issues that should be part of that conversation. Apart from one example of a common name that is already subject to some debate, we have avoided listing other names that might be considered for change because each case is complex and the criteria for changing names should first be agreed in a transparent process to ensure replacement names avoid

further shortcomings. Out of this discussion we hope new guidance can be provided to the Australian Bird Names Committee of BirdLife Australia on appropriate names for Australian birds in the 21st Century. As part of an ongoing process balancing consistency and currency, we recommend that criteria are developed for assessing both the acceptability of bird names and the costs and benefits of changing them in a process that includes all relevant stakeholders. These criteria can then be used to assess the social acceptability of bird names and inform recommendations on new names appropriate to our times.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Stephen T. Garnett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0724-7060>

Golo Maurer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3737-2479>

Georgia E. Garrard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4031-9054>

References

- American Ornithological Society, (2020a). Guidelines for English Bird Names. <https://americanornithology.org/nacc/guidelines-for-english-names/> (Verified 1 June 2022).
- American Ornithological Society. (2020b). Comments 2020-S-1: Change the English name of *Rhynchophanes mccownii*. <https://americanornithology.org/nacc/current-prior-proposals/2020-proposals/comments-2020-s/> (Verified 1 June 2022)
- BirdLife Australia (2019). The BirdLife Australia working list of Australian Birds. Version 3. <https://www.birdlife.org.au/conservation/science/taxonomy>.
- Buchmann, E. J., and Downs, C. T. (2018). Ostrich, Southern Ostrich, or common Ostrich? The 'eternal vexed question' of English bird names and name changes in Southern Africa through eight editions of Roberts field guides, 1940–2016. *Ostrich* **89**, 205–210. doi:10.2989/00306525.2018.1460408
- Driver, R. J., and Bond, A. L. (2021). Towards redressing inaccurate, offensive and inappropriate common bird names. *Ibis* **163**, 1492–1499. doi:10.1111/ibi.12984
- Ehmke, G., Fitzsimons, J. A., and Garnett, S. T. (2017). Standardising English names for Australian bird subspecies as a conservation tool. *Bird Conservation International* **28**, 73–85. doi:10.1017/S0959270916000538
- Fraser, I., and Gray, J. (2013). 'Australian Bird Names.' (CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne.)
- Gramsci, A. (1982). 'La città futura: 1917-1918.' (Turin: Einaudi).
- Gregg, E. A., Bekessy, S. A., Martin, J. K., and Garrard, G. E. (2020). Many IUCN red list species have names that evoke negative emotions. *Human Dimensions of Wildlife* **25**, 468–477. doi:10.1080/10871209.2020.1753132
- Lendon, A. H. (1968). Presidential address, annual congress (RAOU), 1967. *Emu* **68**, 227–232.

- Mill, J. S. (1879). *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence, and the Methods of Scientific Investigation.* (Longmans Green and Co: London.)
- Mitchell, T. L. (1839). 'Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia: With Descriptions of the Recently Explored Region of Australia Felix, and of the Present Colony of New South Wales.' (T&W Boone: London.)
- RAOU (Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union). (1926). 'The Official Checklist of the Birds of Australia.' 2nd. (Govt Printer: Melbourne.)
- Satia, P. (2021). Britain's culture war: disguising imperial politics as historical debate about empire. *Journal of Genocide Research* **21**, 1–3.
- Schodde, R., Glover, B., Kinsky, F. C., Marchant, S., McGill, A. R., and Parker, S. A. (1977). Recommended English names for Australian birds. *Emu* **77**, 245–307.
- Stegemann, L. (2021). 'Amnesia Road: Landscape, Violence and Memory.' (NewSouth Publishing: Sydney.)
- Windsor, G. (2009). The Recognition of Aboriginal place-names in New South Wales. In 'Naming and Re-naming the Australian Landscape.' (Eds H. Koch and L. Hercus). pp. 71–86. (Canberra: ANU e-Press).