





## Forum

## Building bridges in the conversation on eponymous common names of North American birds

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Like many other fields, ornithology and birding are addressing their legacy of colonialism, including re-examining their naming practices. Discussions about eponyms, when species are named to honour people, sit at the intersection of nomenclatural stability and social justice concerns. In response to a charged debate about the future of eponymous common names, members of the American Ornithological Society (AOS)'s Diversity

and Inclusion Committee held one-on-one listening sessions in 2020 with stakeholder groups across the birding and ornithology community and, in 2021, organized a Community Congress where stakeholders shared thoughts with a public audience. These two events aimed to create spaces for thoughtful dialogue around an inflamed topic and to identify areas of consensus for moving forward. Here we summarize the main findings from these two activities. We found broad agreement among stakeholders that (1) social justice is a valid reason to change names, (2) many issues – especially the technical, decision-making and public-engagement aspects of name changes – need to be considered, and (3) educational opportunities are not only abundant but critical in any name-change process to achieve the stated goals of increasing diversity and belonging in birding and ornithology. Our work highlights the importance of including many voices in conversations when proposed changes to public use systems, such as common names, appear to conflict with current decision-making methods. By creating a space away from knee-jerk reactions, our listening sessions and the Community Congress found that the scientists, birders, educators, data/wildlife managers and field guide authors we spoke with are willing to engage in crucial conversations of how to deal with eponymous common names, as part of engaging with ornithology's colonialist history.

Como muchos otros campos, la ornitología y la observación de aves están enfrentando a su legado del colonialismo, lo que incluye una revisión de sus prácticas de nomenclatura. Las discusiones sobre epónimos, nombres de especies dedicadas en honor a personas específicas, se encuentran en el cruce entre la estabilidad nomenclatural y las preocupaciones de la justicia social. En respuesta al intenso debate acerca del futuro de los nombres comunes epónimos de aves, algunos miembros del Comité de Diversidad e Inclusión de la Sociedad Ornitológica Americana (AOS, por sus siglas en inglés) tuvieron sesiones de escucha en el 2020 con grupos de partidos interesados de las comunidades de observación de aves y ornitología y en el 2021 organizaron un Congreso Comunitario donde los partidos interesados compartieron sus opiniones con el público. Estos dos eventos tuvieron como objetivo crear espacios para el diálogo reflexivo sobre este tema polémico, así como identificar áreas de consenso para el futuro. Aquí resumimos los hallazgos principales de estas dos actividades. Encontramos acuerdo general entre los partidos interesados de que (1) la justicia social es una razón válida para justificar cambios de nomenclatura, (2) muchos asuntos y barreras asociados con los cambios de nomenclatura – especialmente los aspectos técnicos, de toma de decisiones y de participación pública – necesitan ser considerados y (3) no sólo abundan oportunidades educativas sino son críticas en todo proceso de cambio de

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nomenclatura para lograr los objetivos declarados de incrementar la diversidad y el sentido de pertenencia en la observación de aves y en la ornitología. Nuestro trabajo destaca la importancia de la inclusión de muchas voces en conversaciones cuando existen propuestas de cambios en sistemas de uso público, como los nombres comunes de las aves, que parecen estar en conflicto con los métodos actuales para la toma de decisiones. Al crear un espacio lejos de emociones viscerales, nuestras sesiones de escucha y el Congreso Comunitario encontraron que los científicos, observadores de aves, educadores, autores de guías de campo y administradores de vida silvestre y de datos con los que dialogamos están dispuestos a participar en conversaciones importantes sobre cómo tratar los nombres comunes epónimos mientras enfrentamos el legado de colonialismo en la ornitología.

**Keywords:** bird names, diversity, eponyms, inclusion, nomenclature.

Renewed spotlights on racism in the United States – sparked by the Memorial Day 2020 killing of George Floyd by police and the racially charged confrontation of birder Christian Cooper by a white woman – have injected greater urgency in society to acknowledge and address legacies of racism and colonialism. The scientific community has also been exploring how systemic racism and coloniality are embedded in academic practice, with behaviours and cultures that often exclude black, indigenous and people of colour from scientific scholarship and success (Hoppe *et al.* 2019, Schell *et al.* 2020, Trisos *et al.* 2021). Creating a scientific culture with greater diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ) is not only a societal responsibility but also advances scientific discoveries, innovation and long-term economic growth via growing the scientific workforce (Campbell *et al.* 2013, Valentine & Collins 2015).

The common names of species provide a first entry point for accessing the natural world. Yet they may reflect pejorative or discriminatory language, or evoke long-standing reminders of exclusion in science. Since 2020, there has been an increase in calls for name changes across taxa for reasons of inclusion and justice. For example, the Entomological Society of America recently elected to remove ‘gypsy’ from the common names of two insects in recognition of this term’s derogatory nature for Romani people. The moth was renamed the Spongy Moth in 2022 by a working group including entomologists and people identifying as Romani (Entomological Society of America 2022a). In the same year, the society also renamed the Asian Giant Hornet (popularly referred to as ‘murder hornet’) as the Northern Giant Hornet to move away from geographical references, especially for invasive species or pests, out of

concern for stoking xenophobic sentiments (Entomological Society of America 2022b).

Across several taxa, the common names of many species honour people, including through eponyms (typically, but not exclusively, through the possessive construction ‘[name of person]’s [species],’ e.g. Kirtland’s Warbler). Eponyms may identify the first reporter of a species to Western science, recognize an individual’s contribution to the field or honour people from personal friends to public figures. Historically, criticism about the use of eponyms for species focused on the names’ lack of descriptive insight into that species’ natural history or identifying features (Eisenmann & Poor 1946).

Recently, eponymous common names have been re-examined through the lens of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice, with the concern that their use affirms the power and privilege of select groups in dictating scientific norms and representation. Similar concerns have been raised for scientific names (e.g. DuBay *et al.* 2020 and Guedes *et al.* 2023). Moreover, eponyms honour some individuals who explicitly embraced racist beliefs (e.g. the namesake of Scott’s Oriole *Icterus parisorum*, Winfield Scott, the American military commander who oversaw the ‘Trail of Tears’ forced migration of indigenous peoples) and many others whose professional achievements were generally made possible by colonialist institutions and policies oppressing other people. As such, their origin and continued use have been viewed as upholding inequity in both scientific participation and discovery (Cronin *et al.* 2021, Driver & Bond 2021, Trisos *et al.* 2021). Debate around this topic has brought to light a diverse range of opinions on whether and how to change eponymous common and/or scientific names (Antonelli *et al.* 2023, Ceriaco *et al.* 2023, Jost *et al.* 2023, Mabele *et al.* 2023, Orr *et al.* 2023, Raposo *et al.* 2023, Roksandic *et al.* 2023, Thiele 2023).

Though the impact and use of common names – particularly for birds – reach well beyond the academic community, decisions on standardized names typically rest on scientific bodies. The North American Classification Committee (NACC) of the American Ornithological Society (AOS), established in 1886, evaluates the scientific and common names of birds included in the Checklist of North American Birds. Changes to scientific names follow strict principles outlined by the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN 1999), whereas changes to common names are generally seen as more flexible. In making changes to common names, the NACC (as most taxonomic bodies) holds stability as a central principle (North American Classification Committee 2020). Common and scientific names have different target audiences, leading to different consequences to their changes (e.g. the impact to a sense of attachment to names is different in common names compared with scientific names). However, arguments in favour of upholding stability and priority are similar for both and

revolve around the benefits of continuity of standardized names to avoid confusion and logistical problems (e.g. in the scientific literature, conservation efforts and day-to-day life; Isaac *et al.* 2004, Garnett & Christidis 2017, North American Classification Committee 2020, Ceriaco *et al.* 2023). Most name changes strictly reflect taxonomic updates and, until recently, social justice has not been an acceptable reason for common or scientific name changes (Banks *et al.* 2000, Ceriaco *et al.* 2023). For instance, the stated justification for the common name change of Oldsquaw to Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* in 2000 was to harmonize the use of Long-tailed Duck with the rest of the world, even though the reason for the proposal's submission was to reduce barriers to conservation by avoiding potential offence to Indigenous peoples (Banks *et al.* 2000). Our Forum focuses on common name changes because the AOS has greater flexibility in determining the standards by which to change English common names vs. scientific names, and because of the relevance of the recent events described below.

A 2019 proposal to change the common name of McCown's Longspur *Rhynchophanes mccownii*, named for the person who documented the species in the Western record and later fought for the Confederacy during the US Civil War, was rejected but led to updates to the NACC's naming policies to permit changing offensive names (North American Classification Committee 2020). In August 2020, the NACC changed the species' common name to Thick-billed Longspur after a new proposal in light of 'heightened awareness of racial issues' (Chesser *et al.* 2021). Beyond these actions, AOS had not engaged in dialogue with the wider community about larger-scale eponym changes. This dynamic highlighted the need for constructive steps to provide an initial awareness of the complexities of name changes and an inclusive approach to understand diverse perspectives. Reconciling these complexities could ultimately identify areas of consensus allowing the issue to move forward.

The AOS Checklist as the official source on the taxonomy of birds in North America makes the Society's participation relevant in this conversation. Recognizing in mid-2020 that the lack of AOS-driven public engagement on bird names had been a barrier to discourse, and that the AOS Diversity and Inclusion Committee could mediate such engagement, a subgroup (we, the authors) volunteered to help the Society improve communications around the topic. Our subcommittee undertook two activities to consider perspectives from a cross-section of ornithologists, managers and birders. First, we conducted individual listening sessions with stakeholders (groups and individuals) to gather information on their perspectives about the intent, process and impact of changing common bird names (Part 1). Aside from two of the stakeholders, we had no prior knowledge of the

perspectives of the stakeholders. These sessions allowed us to learn about the nuances of the issue and also solicit interest in a public discussion around ideas on the name change process. We then convened a public event to share stakeholder views regarding name changes, including technical implications and opportunities for creating a more welcoming ornithological community (Part 2). Here, we outline the process and general findings from both activities to highlight the value of reaching beyond taxonomic committees and documenting perspectives of users not typically part of decision-making in bird names.

## Part 1: Listening sessions across the birding and ornithological community

When we began our work in summer 2020, the debate over eponyms had become emotionally charged and personal to many people. We felt it was urgent to be proactive about creating opportunities for dialogue, on the principle that the first step to repair is to ensure people feel seen and heard. Our priority was to create space (first with our group, and ultimately with the wider community) for thoughtful conversations with multiple and diverse stakeholder groups whose work interacts with and/or is impacted by bird name changes.

To hear a range of perspectives on eponyms and the general usage of common bird names, we conducted individual listening sessions from September to November 2020 with scientists, birders, educators, data/wildlife managers and field guide authors (Table 1). We first held listening sessions with the NACC (alongside the AOS Executive Committee) and Bird Names for Birds. Established in 2020, the latter is a grassroots initiative that calls for all eponymous English common bird names to be changed, including through a 2020 petition to AOS, and highlights the offensive actions of certain birds' namesakes (Bird Names for Birds 2023). Because these groups' stated opinions were familiar to us, the first two calls focused more on the groups' responses to the ongoing debate and what a successful public event might look like.

We then requested calls with major bird-related organizations, agencies and individuals who represent broad constituencies of bird name users and/or have expertise with bird names. We also contacted organizations or individuals recommended to us during our calls with stakeholders and from the AOS that fit these criteria. Finally, we opportunistically watched a webinar hosted by the Toronto Public Library on decolonizing bird names (<https://www.crowdcast.io/e/tpldecolonizingbirds/register>) featuring an Indigenous educator and arranged a call with the presenters. In total (including NACC and Bird Names for Birds), we requested calls with 11 organizations and five sets of individuals. Stakeholders from

**Table 1.** List of stakeholder groups we spoke to, and whether their views are represented in Part 1 (listening sessions) and/or Part 2 (the Community Congress).

Stakeholder	Type	n	Part	Part
			1	2
AOS Executive Committee/North American Classification Committee/Nomenclature Ad Hoc Committee	Scientists	7		
Presenters of the Toronto Public Library webinar on decolonizing bird names	Individual educators	2		
Bird Names for Birds	Various	6		X
Global avian checklist projects (eBird/Clements checklist and IOC World Bird List)	Scientists	4	X	X
American Birding Association	Birders	4	X	X
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Birds	Managers	1	X	
U.S. Geological Survey, Bird Banding Lab and North American Breeding Bird Survey	Managers	4	X	X
National Audubon Society	Various	5	X	X
Birds Canada	Various	5	X	X
Kenn Kaufman	Individual field guide author	1	X	X
David Allen Sibley	Individual field guide author	1	X	X

Stakeholder: the individual or group. Type: the role/interaction with bird names. *n*: the maximum number of individuals represented in either Part 1 or 2.

eight organizations, and three sets of individuals, responded (Table 1); with all respondents, we held 60- to 90-min listening sessions over Zoom for each group. Going forth, we use the term ‘stakeholder group’ to describe the participants of each listening session, whether they were categorized as individuals or groups.

Takeaways from the sessions with NACC, Bird Names for Birds and the Toronto Public Library webinar presenters are not included in our summary for Part 1 because those sessions were qualitatively different and we did not cover the same topics as for the eight listening sessions. However, those conversations did inform the questions we asked in the eight sessions.

For the eight listening sessions we summarize, we did not have prior knowledge of stakeholder perspectives. Our conversations were free-flowing and began by soliciting stakeholders’ thoughts on whatever aspects of the name-change issue they prioritized most. Our follow-up questions evolved slightly as we became more familiar with the topic and identified common themes across listening sessions. On later calls, we occasionally asked stakeholders’ thoughts on points brought up in previous calls. We defined our scope as the eponyms with possessive construction on NACC’s checklist (*n* = 144, Chesser *et al.* 2022). We then summarized perspectives (aggregated and anonymized) from topics such as:

- The costs of changing vs. not changing names from each stakeholder’s perspective.
- How stakeholders and their audiences have dealt with name changes in the past.

- How to identify which names to change, how to identify and assess alternate names, and how to uphold equity and inclusion in these steps.
- We opened and closed by asking their interest in participating in a public discussion on bird names.

All eight stakeholder groups acknowledged the social justice issues that intersect with present-day discussions about eponyms. One group questioned the extent to which eponyms impede participation in ornithology and birding. Six groups said they support change if it helps increase inclusion in birding and ornithology. Two groups also pointed out that eponyms are not useful in identification of birds compared with more descriptive names.

Conversations about diversity, equity, inclusion and justice were often paired with discussions of stability. Stakeholders described names as reference systems, in that a certain amount of continuity is required to organize and retrieve all information for a given species. Two groups discussed at length how name changes potentially disrupt the stability that is prioritized and built into the taxonomic system. Six groups discussed how these disruptions already occur regularly when deemed warranted taxonomically and gave examples of how users were able to adapt over time.

Three main considerations arose for changing eponymous bird names:

**Technical challenges call for coordination across stakeholders**  
Stakeholders mentioned several technical challenges associated with large-scale name changes. A primary



consideration is to define the scale at which name changes might occur and to reconcile this scale with that of regional databases and checklists. This step was mentioned as being particularly important for species with wide geographical ranges. International and cross-checklist consensus is necessary to synchronize changes, avoid conflicts or redundancy with other names and avoid perceptions of unilateral change by a single committee. Ongoing efforts (e.g. Working Group Avian Checklists) could help minimize conflicts around this issue in the future, though the Checklists' purview is explicitly to align taxonomy rather than common names (International Ornithologists' Union 2019). The key opportunity to address these challenges is through a unified, collaborative approach across different committees and agencies, which will ease a transition to new names.

The question of whether to replace only 'harmful' eponyms or all eponyms came up repeatedly. One group discussed retaining names that honour ornithologists who made important contributions and did not commit individual misdeeds. This approach minimizes disruption by examining on a case-by-case basis the names that are sufficiently harmful to merit change. However, in five sessions where participants raised the question of how to make those decisions, all groups favoured changing all eponyms rather than examining names individually. Four of these five stakeholder groups commented on the difficulty of drawing the line between names that 'should' be kept and those that should be discarded, with the risk that disagreements over who has the authority and skill set to make such value judgements could derail the process entirely. Across sessions, stakeholders emphasized the importance of transparency and equity throughout the name-changing process.

#### *Increase inclusivity in the decision-making and naming processes*

Four stakeholder groups suggested involving people with expertise beyond taxonomy to bring complementary perspectives to name changes. Diverse representation was defined as people from diverse backgrounds and expertise across ornithology, birding and taxonomy. Ideas for an updated process included developing new names that are easy to remember and understand; documenting name precedents, including names or naming practices outside Western science or standardized checklists; and consulting with broadly defined experts to draw on knowledge of a species. Three stakeholder groups suggested a formal committee consisting of diverse individuals be responsible for coordinating an inclusive naming process.

#### *Education and messaging are critical to the name-change process*

The impact of changing eponyms will be felt broadly. A major theme outlined by seven stakeholder groups was

the educational and outreach opportunities of the name-change process. Stakeholders advocated for a robust education effort for two reasons. First, it is unlikely that changing names without outreach will increase engagement. Achieving the goal of increasing inclusion in and accessibility to birding and ornithology requires a broader approach addressing the history of naming practices and the rationale for changes. This approach will be necessary to increase engagement and decrease perceptions of cosmetic or arbitrary changes.

Secondly, confusion in name assignments and replacements has substantial implications for education, research and conservation. Efforts to minimize confusion through communication about changes are crucial. Stakeholders emphasized how careful planning, coordination and education- and outreach-related efforts will be necessary to ensure that changing eponyms increases buy-in and minimizes disruption. Taken together, stakeholders generally felt that changing names brings challenges but these were not seen as insurmountable barriers to name changes, and there were legitimate reasons to move forward with name changes.

## **Part 2: AOS Community Congress**

Working with AOS leadership and staff, we next organized a public discussion around ideas on the name change process. The 'AOS Community Congress on English Bird Names', held in April 2021, was a moderated panel, on Zoom, featuring panellists from our listening sessions (Table 1). Every group we spoke with individually was invited to be a panellist. Ultimately, 15 panellists participated, representing eBird, U.S. Geological Survey (Breeding Bird Survey and Bird Banding Lab), Bird Names for Birds, the National Audubon Society, Birds Canada, two field guide authors and the American Birding Association. The Toronto Public Library webinar presenters did not reply and the representative(s) from USFWS and NACC declined to participate as panellists: USFWS said it did not have the capacity to participate, while NACC chose to attend in a listening role.

All panellists signed a Speaker Agreement stating the respective responsibilities of AOS and of the panellist. The latter included commitment to the AOS Meeting Code of Conduct (American Ornithological Society 2022a) and Social Media and Commenting Policy (American Ornithological Society 2022b).

The Community Congress consisted of a 120-min virtual webinar and was moderated by a facilitator experienced in science equity and community-building. A few days before the Congress, AOS communications staff publicized the event on official social media platforms and drafted talking points for use in media relations. AOS staff and Diversity and Inclusion

Committee organizers (i.e. we, the authors) together wrote an email invitation to AOS members specifically. We wrote a script for a portion of the introduction and also circulated a list of pre-submitted questions posed by registrants to panellists, inviting panellists to volunteer to answer questions they were interested in addressing. Finally, we put together a run-of-show for the event detailing the time at which every action was expected to take place, the person responsible or on screen for each action, and accompanying technical notes. Panellists were asked to assemble 15 min beforehand for sound checks and a brief review of the event trajectory.

The Community Congress proceeded as follows: During the introduction (about 20 min), we described the goals of the event, reminded the audience about their agreeing to the AOS Meeting Code of Conduct, and gave context and background of the Community Congress, including an overview of the listening sessions. The facilitator then set a constructive tone by distinguishing between productive vs. unproductive methods of conflict (e.g. ways of listening, asking questions and framing issues or people) and stating a mindfulness reminder and land acknowledgment before introducing the panel. In the next section (45 min), each panellist presented a prepared statement about their views of bird name changes and the priorities from their respective professional area. These statements were followed by 50 min of Q&A of both pre-submitted and live questions, followed by 5 min of closing comments and wrap-up. AOS staff oversaw the Zoom technical details and we curated live questions to send to the facilitator. After the event, we invited all panellists and AOS staff to a separate Zoom call to debrief and offer any thoughts on the completed event.

The full recording of the Community Congress is available on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/84GchnXInb8>), and the transcript of the event is available as Supplementary Material Data S1. The live event drew 641 unique viewers on Zoom; as of February 2024, the recording had over 2800 views on YouTube. Overall, views discussed in the Congress overlapped broadly with those in stakeholder listening sessions. Here, we share the major perspectives we heard in the Community Congress with excerpted quotes from panellists, edited for clarity.

#### *Diversity, equity, inclusion and justice is a valid reason to change names*

Most panellists discussed the topic of eponyms from a social-justice context, with some describing the evolution of their thinking.

Christian Cooper's experience in Central Park brought social justice issues to the forefront of the birding community not because it was a new issue

but because it was one we could no longer ignore or not react to. So Gabriel [Foley] and I spoke up about bird names in June of 2020, and how eponymous names don't reflect the welcoming, inclusive community we know that birding can be.

*Jordan Rutter, Bird Names for Birds*

My main reason for supporting changing these names is simply respect. Respect for all of the people whose ancestors were harmed by the white European society that early ornithologists were a part of, and also respect for the birds. For me, these eponymous names were neutral until I learned more about their history. The more I learn, the more that history casts a shadow over the birds, and names like Scott's Oriole or Hammond's Flycatcher don't mean just the bird anymore. They have baggage.

*David Allen Sibley, field guide author*

#### *Technical challenges must be considered*

Panellists recognized that the confusion arising from improperly done changes risks interrupting engagement and conservation efforts. Because of the central role of common names in the birding and ornithological community, a durable name-change process must anticipate and address multiple downstream effects.

We can take measures to successfully minimize how disruptive any, say, bulk name-changing events can be to the chain of continuity, but one thing we also have to be really careful to keep in mind is that the action isn't perceived as setting a new precedent for future, more frequent name changes, because that really could pose a more dramatic risk of disrupting the chain of continuity.

*Dave Ziolkowski, U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey*

If we have new names along with new four-letter codes to deal with, it could be a big turn-off for banders. So in that sense, I'm a little concerned about who actually will do the naming, and I'd like to hope that that would be actually considered as a reasonably important part of the process.

*Danny Bystrak, U.S. Geological Survey Bird Banding Lab*

#### *Ideas for who else to involve are clearer than how to proceed*

Many panellists recommended that naming committees be diversified so that the ethical expertise required for this work be represented alongside the taxonomic. Open questions remained about the extent of broader public involvement, as well as other next steps. For instance,

stakeholders endorsed various (not all mutually exclusive) approaches to the pace of change, weighing the benefits of a faster rollout against a slower one.

I think a deciding body should include diverse stakeholders that are informed on inclusion and equity in addition to taxonomy and life history of birds. There's an opportunity here to create a transparent process that can be a model used for other languages, other parts of the world, for dealing with eponyms going forward.

*Yousif Attia, Birds Canada*

I think rather than nibbling away at the problem, I'd like to see a talented and diverse committee that would tackle all of these eponyms at once. They could come up with alternatives, spend a lot of time getting buy-in for them from the larger community, and then establish a long lead time to a date when we would flip the switch and adopt all of these new, better names.

*Kenn Kaufman, field guide author*

Though we think it's important not to get too far out in front of public opinion, we think this change can and should be undertaken sooner rather than later and quickly and comprehensively rather than slowly and piecemeal.

*Jeffrey Gordon, American Birding Association*

To change names globally and at this vast new scale will require us to work in phases, which means we'll need some smart prioritization, which I think will help to bring along a broader coalition and also to roll out these changes effectively. We all saw with the longspur last year that some eponyms are more problematic than others, and that would be one important axis upon which to prioritize. [...] And after those priorities, the more recently adopted names may be the easier ones to address given their much smaller footprint in literature and ornithological consciousness. [...] Let's work together to create the effective and thoughtful process we need to revise and roll out additional name changes at these new scales.

*Marshall Iliff, eBird*

### **Engagement with bird name users is key**

One of the main goals of name changes is to improve new and existing members' sense of belonging in the ornithological and birding community. Panellists framed the payoff as an inclusive way to increase participation and investment in both the scientific process and the protection of biodiversity. Validating people's emotional attachments to existing names was suggested to aid with

buy-in. Finally, pre-emptive efforts to publicize revisions and timelines were emphasized to help ensure a smooth transition.

The pandemic brought so many new people into birds, into birding. We've got newer birders, we've got younger people, we've got more diverse people experiencing and seeing the joys of birds. The more support we're going to have to get people to participate in monitoring programmes, the more people are going to want to donate to protect habitat or join organizations that are out there advocating on behalf of birds. There is a big conservation opportunity here, and it really stems from first identifying barriers and figuring out a positive way forward to break those down.

*Jody Allair, Birds Canada*

I still know that half the people that I talk to when I see an oriole locally, that to them it's a Northern Oriole, and almost everybody still says Rufous-sided Towhee. So we're not going to change what everybody says in their general usage, but I think what we do have is an opportunity to help move the game forward in terms of being a more welcoming field and hobby.

*Geoff LeBaron, National Audubon Society*

Taxonomic changes happen, English names [change], you deal with it as best you can. Try to put as much information out there as you can to ensure the continuity. It's very much like road names. Road names change in time, and you hope people who are in that line of business go the distance for you to try to share with you the information they have.

*Dave Ziolkowski, U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey*

## **REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

We offer the present summary as the first step in AOS's public engagement on the bird names issue. The stakeholder groups we spoke with across the birding and ornithological community felt that the social justice issues around bird names are important, and among the groups we spoke with, there was more unity than resistance to changing bird names. The next steps to changing names and ensuring equity in future names are related to technical coordination and proper communication with the public. These steps will merit time and careful planning.

Our efforts are unique in bringing together bird name users who traditionally have not been involved in the formal process of naming birds. Given the widespread

use of English bird names, the sustained interactions between naming committees and users of names will be invaluable. We also acknowledge the relative lack of ethnic and gender diversity of the panellists, and that we only heard from a subset of bird name users. This was due to a combination of people's availability to participate, lack of engagement with the AOS from people of colour because of perceptions of non-inclusivity, and the overall heavily white makeup of the birding and ornithological community, especially in leadership positions. Because a competing priority was to organize a public forum in a timely fashion, we were limited in the number of listening sessions that could be conducted before planning for the Community Congress had to begin. We recognize there is a spectrum of views surrounding name changes beyond the panellists' views. Societies wishing to hold similar events could be more deliberate about assembling a panel with greater representation in demographics and interests. Nevertheless, the fact that a search to include unknown perspectives led to hearing dominant-culture leaders' endorsement of name changes also carried a salient message.

When coordinating the listening sessions, the initial process was necessarily *ad hoc*, since our goal as relative newcomers to the topic was to discover as much about the issue as possible. As we proceeded with listening sessions, we developed a more standardized list of questions. If other organizations wish to avoid conflating this 'burn-in' information-gathering period with more systematic interviews, and have the time to do so, we suggest separating discovery calls from formal interviews.

We found coordinated preparation to be invaluable for event planning, especially in working with AOS staff to generate unified materials for publicity. That said, one aspect where we could have improved was selecting a date that was more inclusive to the ornithological community. The date was scheduled to accommodate panellists and organizers (e.g. several organizers were going on parental leave imminently) but it unfortunately conflicted with the joint annual meeting of other ornithological societies. We recorded the meeting so that people who could not attend due to this and other conflicts would have access to the event. We recommend future forum organizers avoid similar scheduling conflicts when trying to reach the wider community.

### Concerns about large-scale name changes

Our experiences with the listening sessions and the Community Congress, and with researching opinions expressed online, highlighted reasons for disagreement with a large-scale approach to changing bird names. Foremost were the concerns that name changes would be symbolic only, without materially improving inclusion or equity in the field, at potentially great scientific

cost, and that the time investment needed for such an effort would detract from bird conservation. Another concern was that removing the names of people who made important ornithological contributions alongside avowed 'bad actors' might strip deserved honours and lead to the perception of cancelling individuals and indiscriminately erasing history. There were also practical reservations: concern that identifying suitable replacement names would be a significant undertaking, paired with the uncertainty over how potentially multiple new processes might unfold. An additional pitfall expressed was that changing all names under AOS's jurisdiction might perpetuate colonialist practices of foisting new names onto other countries/cultures, resulting in perverse consequences for diversity and inclusion efforts. Finally, we heard concerns about the difficulty of learning new names, especially for people without access to digital resources or tour guides whose livelihoods are dependent on knowing bird names.

These concerns speak to the risks of a poorly conceived plan and, conversely, the elements of communication and execution that are critical to promoting engagement in ornithology and birding, and ultimately aiding in conservation efforts. While not addressing such concerns point-by-point, the stakeholders' suggestions did point the way forward for a process that responds to different concerns. For example, they underscored the importance of clarifying to the public exactly why, although evaluating names on an individual basis seems systematic, changing all names is ultimately the more feasible path because it circumvents the need to make moral judgements (and to come up with a process to attempt to do so). Moreover, solutions to some of the implementation concerns can improve existing name-change practices. For instance, AOS-issued resources are currently limited in aiding the public with name changes resulting from taxonomic revisions, so any solutions developed to help people transition to this set of revisions may help with learning all types of new names.

### Events following the Community Congress

From March to September 2022, AOS assembled an English Bird Names Ad Hoc Committee that included people specifically chosen from different professional and demographic backgrounds. The committee was tasked with developing recommendations for a name-change process for species within AOS's purview. From September 2022 to July 2023, the committee developed three recommendations: (1) to change all English bird names named directly after people as well as three names with culturally unsuitable references, (2) to establish a separate standing committee responsible for common name changes and (3) to involve the public in the process leading to the selection of new names. These



recommendations were submitted and unanimously approved by AOS Council, the society's governing body, in August 2023.

In November 2023, AOS formally announced its commitment to move ahead with these recommendations (American Ornithological Society 2023), focusing first on birds occurring primarily in the USA and Canada to provide time for discussion and coordination with Neotropical partners about name changes in those regions. Since the AOS's announcement, the society has received feedback spanning the gradient between positive and negative. Such responses show that, unsurprisingly, the agreement we found in leadership in ornithology and birding is not universal. However, an analysis of the responses to the announcement is beyond the scope of this Forum.

While the scale of the proposed name changes is unprecedented, ornithology is not alone in addressing this issue. Scientific societies can look to each other for best practices and frameworks for dealing with problematic names. In addition to the resources enlisted and produced by AOS over the past year, the Entomological Society of America's Better Common Names Project offers practical resources such as the press release and checklist of the Spongy Moth Transition Kit (Entomological Society of America 2022a).

By creating a space separate from knee-jerk reactions and toward one for discourse, our listening sessions and the Community Congress found that the scientists, birders, educators, data/wildlife managers and field guide authors we spoke with are willing to engage in crucial conversations of how to deal with eponyms, as part of engaging with ornithology's colonialist history. We found overall alignment in the belief that addressing this issue will enhance the ability of the birding and ornithological world to better serve and diversify the many communities dedicated to the joy, research and conservation of birds.

The work in this paper was performed by us (the authors) on behalf of the AOS Diversity and Inclusion Committee. We present it not as a description of an official AOS stance, but instead as a summary of the work by the nine individuals who conducted it. The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and should not be construed to represent any official U.S. Department of Agriculture or U.S. Government determination or policy. We are deeply appreciative of everyone who gave their time to talk to us over the course of this project. We especially thank all Community Congress panel members: J. Gordon, J. Allair, Y. Attia, K. Jones, D. Lepage, G. Foley, A. Holt, J. Rutter, M. Iliff, G. Hartman, G. LeBaron, K. Kaufman, D. Sibley, D. Bystrak and D. Ziolkowski. For both case studies, statements from individuals reflected their own opinions and experiences, not official positions of their institutions. We thank D. Lanham for the initial encouragement for a public conversation on bird names. We thank the AOS

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Irene A. Liu:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Eric R. Gulson-Castillo:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Joanna X. Wu:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Amelia-Juliette C. Demery:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology. **Nandadevi Cortes-Rodriguez:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology. **Kristen M. Covino:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Susannah B. Lerman:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology. **Sharon A. Gill:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology. **Viviana Ruiz Gutierrez:** Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology.

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None.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

**Data S1.** Transcript of the American Ornithological Society (AOS) Community Congress on English Bird Names, 16 April 2021.