

Ecclesiastical Bird Names in Louisiana-French

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BECOMING ACQUAINTED with many charming Louisiana-French terms in 1910 did much to intensify my interest in the folk names of birds. Who could resist such apt, as well as ear-tickling, appellations as: *sac à plomb* (bag of lead) for the pied-billed grebe, so gifted in sinking beneath the water, leaving not a ripple; *garde-soleil* (look at the sun) for the bittern, whose common oblique pose suggests it is obeying that command; or *violon* (violin) for the redhead duck from the faintly musical whistling of its winnowing wings.

A large volume could be written on the natural history names in Gulf Coast French, which, centering in Louisiana, has some influence on popular speech east to Mobile, Alabama, and west to Galveston, Texas. No lengthy dissertation is planned here, however; rather a sample is offered that may whet the taste of the reader so that he may wish to make further test of the substance and flavor of the Creole and Acadian dialects. Key references are given at the end of this chapter.

In Du Pratz's *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 1758, it was recorded that for reasons sufficient to themselves, the French colonists applied the titles of ecclesiastical dignitaries to some of the conspicuously-colored American birds, and the student of a period some 150 years later finds that their descendants have not ceased the practice, but on the contrary have continued and increased it.

The indigo-blue of the male indigo bird's plumage reminded them of the violet robe of a bishop, so the bird was dubbed *évêque* or bishop. Then it developed that there was a larger bird, the blue grosbeak, the male of which was rich, dark blue, and it was called *gran' évêque* (big bishop) and king *évêque*.

The principle being accepted, the redbird could be named only

cardinal for its body color recalled the cassock, and its crest the biretta, of that high-ranking prelate.

When it came to choosing a "pope," the color basis was modified unless we reason that the painted bunting or nonpareil, first recipient of the supreme title, with its brilliantly variegated plumage, was assumed to be in command of all colors. The cognomen, *pape* (and its phonetic English equivalent "pop") became most popular, and in time was applied to the bishop- and cardinal-birds already mentioned and extended to several other brightly-colored species. Most of them were exploited in the cage-bird traffic of the time (now fortunately moribund) and the name *pape* and "pop" (as well as the others) spread and were translated or adapted into various West-European languages. Long usage doubtless led to virtual disregard of the literal meaning of the titles borrowed from churchly terminology; otherwise it is difficult to understand the incorporation with them of modifiers of no ecclesiastical pertinence, some of which, indeed, seem quite irreverent.

In the home range of the pope-names, chiefly Louisiana, the following combinations have been recorded for ten species of birds. Prothonotary warbler (fore-parts golden-yellow).

Pape d'or (golden pope), *pape jaune* (yellow pope), yellow pop. American redstart (the male is black and reddish-orange).

Red pop.

Orchard oriole (the male is chestnut and black; the female yellowish-olive).

Pape choc (chock pope, first term from a call note), *pape de prairie* (open-land pope), *pape puant* (stinking pope), pop, yellow pop.

Baltimore oriole (the male is orange and black).

Pape aurore (saffron pope), *pape de bois* (woodland pope), *pape d'or* (golden pope), *pape doré* (golden pope), 'tit *pape* (little pope), golden pop.

Scarlet tanager (the male is scarlet with black wings and tail).

Pape (pope), *pape Natchitoches* (Natchitoches pope, from the city of that name; pronounced nackitosh), pop, red pop.

Cardinal (the male is chiefly vermilion-red).

Pop, red pop.

Rose-breasted grosbeak (the breast and lining of the wings of the male are carmine).

Pape d'Espagne (Spanish pope), *pape rose* (rose pope), *pape rose-ole* (roseate pope), *pape trois couleurs* (tri-colored pope).

Blue grosbeak (the male is chiefly rich, dark blue).

Blue pop.

Indigo bunting (the male indigo blue, glancing greenish in some lights).

Pape bleu (blue pope), *petit pape bleu* (little blue pope), blue pop, pop.

Painted bunting (the male has large blocks of rich blue, golden-green, vermilion-red, and purplish-brown. The female is chiefly yellowish-green).

Male: *pape doré* (golden pope), *pape doux* (pretty pope), *pape rouge* (red pope), pop, pretty pop, red pop. Female: *pape vert* (green pope), green pop.

In French Canada, that is Quebec, the indigo bunting has been called *ministre* (priest) and the scarlet tanager, *cardinal*, but no code of such names is evident as in Louisiana. Speakers of a Spanish patois in Louisiana have been heard to designate the prothonotary warbler as *papita aureille* (little golden pope), and the indigo bunting as *papita azule* (little blue pope), and the Mexican element of the lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas use the name *cardenal* for the redbird. This term and modifications thereof are employed rather widely for tanagers in Mexico, Central America, and the West Indies, but nowhere else than in Louisiana does there appear to be systematic use of ecclesiastic titles in popular bird nomenclature.

KEY REFERENCES

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