

## Peter Birds

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**T**HE NAME PETREL, meaning little Peter, and analogous terms in various languages, have a common significance. It was well explained by Alexander Wilson in writing about a species that still bears his name. Of this Storm, or Wilson's petrel he said:

the most singular peculiarity of this bird is its faculty of standing, and even running, on the surface of the water, which it performs with apparent facility. When any greasy matter is thrown overboard, these birds instantly collect around it; and facing to windward, with their long wings expanded, and their webbed feet patting the water, the lightness of their bodies, and the action of the wind on their wings, enable them to do this with ease. In calm weather they perform the same manoeuvre by keeping their wings just so much in action as to prevent their feet from sinking below the surface. According to Buffon, it is from this singular habit that the whole genus have obtained the name Petrel, from the apostle Peter, who, as Scripture informs us, also walked on the water (1824, VII:97.)

Petrel does not seem to be an American folk-term but "Peter" is, and the name doubtless was first adopted for a bird that seemed to be doing something like water-walking. John Lawson in *A New Voyage to Carolina*, 1709, mentioned "Blue-Peters, the same as you call Water-Hens in England" (p. 151). The European waterhen is a close relative of our Florida gallinule, which, if Lawson was correct, must be considered the prototype of our "blue Peters." A. C. Bent says of this bird: "its flight seems weak, labored, and awkward; it flutters along, barely skimming the surface, half flying and half running on the water, as if unable to rise" (1926:352).

I first heard the name "blue Peter" for the American coot, a bird much better known than the gallinule, and one to which the name cited is more widely and more frequently applied. Again quoting Bent: "running along the surface, it beats the water with wings and feet, splashing alternately with its heavy paddles . . .

until it gains sufficient momentum to fly" (1926:363). Thus the coot also is a "water-walker."

The "home range" of the name "blue Peter" doubtless is the Carolinas, and for a choice, coastal North Carolina, where a section of Currituck Sound much frequented by coots, is known as Peters' Quarter, and there are derived names for two species of birds. One of these is "sinkin' Peter" for the pied-billed grebe, in allusion to its ability to sink quietly beneath the water without leaving a trace; and the other "Peter ripper" for the marsh hawk, referring to the attacks of this harrier upon flocks of coots. These are easily observed, while similar attempts upon the more scattered, marsh-dwelling gallinules would be seldom seen.

In 1888 (p. 118), Gurdon Trumbull recorded the name blue Peter as used for the coot from Virginia south to Florida. Since then it has spread farther as records are at hand from Maine to Texas along the coast and from one inland State—Ohio. The appellation is varied to blue petie (N. Y.), blue pete (Ga., Fla.), and Peter (S. C.). The Florida gallinule is known as blue Peter (N. J., N. C., S. C.), and marsh Peter and sedge Peter (N. C.)

A larger and more brilliantly colored gallinule, the purple, is called blue Peter (S. C., Fla., Mo., La., Tex.) and blue pete in Florida, where near Archer there is a Blue Pete Lake.

The application of Peter-terms to the least tern is not clear. Perhaps Peter has been considered transferable to almost any water bird, including the tern, or the names now to be cited may be in part sonic. They are: killing peter, killopeter, killpeter, and sand peter, all from Florida.

A few other birds have been given Peter-names for diverse reasons. Blue Peter (the green heron, N. Y.) probably refers to its color in silhouette, with "Peter" as a familiar or pet name. Then Peter bird for the bluebird (N. Y.), and for the tufted titmouse (Md., Ohio, Ind., Ky., Mo., Tex.; peter-peter also, Ind., Ky.) allude to notes of the birds deemed to sound like the word "peter."

#### LITERATURE CITED

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