American Bird Names. Two Studies

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THE SUPERNATURAL IN AMERICAN BIRD NAMES

By far the largest element in American bird names, suggesting the supernatural, has been contributed by those given to certain divers because of their uncanny disappearing, or remaining beneath, the water. Richardson (in Swainson and Richardson, 1831) mentioned the names spirit duck and conjuring duck as being applied in the Northwest Territories to the golden-eye and the bufflehead ducks because of their instantaneous disappearance "at the flash of a gun or the twang of a bow." That was when hunters, armed with bows and arrows or flintlock guns, mostly missed these birds as if they were crafty conjurors or unsubstantial spirits. Now advantage is on the other side and no bird can evade the leaden death. Both of the names cited by this famous Arctic explorer may have been translations of Indian terms, and I have no example of folk use of "conjuring duck." There are several records, however, for "spirit", and allied, appellations. Spirit duck has been applied to the: horned grebe (Canada, Mass.), pied-billed grebe (Oologist 1893), bufflehead (throughout its northern range), and ruddy duck (Iowa). The bufflehead is known also as spirit dipper in Maryland. Two other prodigious divers have likewise won spirit names: the anhinga or snakebird (spirit bird, Miss.), and the common loon (spirit goose, Ill.). Varying the nomenclature, but not the idea, is the name, ghost duck, for the bufflehead in Maine and for the pied-billed grebe in South Carolina.

There may be a touch of the arrow-and-bullet-dodging idea in the name waterwitch so widely applied to grebes, but the main reason seems to be their apparently magic ability, effortlessly to sink out of sight beneath the water — or to submerge without leaving a trace. The pied-billed grebe, rather generally called waterwitch, was recorded by Thomas Pennant as having this name in New York in 1785. It is termed witch-diver also in South Carolina.

The horned grebe is known as water-witch in various localities (Que., Mass., N. Y., D. C., N. C., Tex.) and as witch, simply, in Maryland. In that State the appellations, pigwick and pigwitch, too, are given this bird. "Wick" is an old form of witch but what the syllable, "pig", signifies is a question. The gray-cheeked grebe is a water-witch in Nova Scotia and Massachusetts. In New Jersey, with allusion to its being larger than the other water-witches, it is dubbed gander-witch. Some Marylanders extend usage of the name water-witch to the mergansers or fish-ducks, and in British Columbia the term refers locally to the water ouzel, a somewhat thrush-like, somewhat wren-like, song-bird that dives, swims, and even walks under water.

Some of the diving birds submerge so long and reappear in so unexpected and distant a quarter that salty observers may remark that they have been to hell. So hell-diver is the vernacular, and it is applied to all of the grebes, practically throughout their ranges. The pied-billed grebe has the more facetious sobriquet of hell-borer in Illinois and the horned grebe the doubly supernatural one of witch hell-diver in Maryland.

Other hell-divers include the common loon (rather generally), bufflehead (N. B., N. S., Me., Mass., Md., Ohio, Miss., Iowa), harlequin duck (N. S.), hooded merganser (Wis.), red-breasted merganser (N.W.T.), common guillemot (Me.), coot (rather generally), and water ouzel (Yukon).

The pied-billed grebe is termed hell-hen, locally in South Carolina, and the old squaw, hell's chicken, in Nova Scotia. Apparently it has been tempting to the folk to substitute "devil" for "hell" in the names of such birds; thus we have as devil-divers, the: common loon and gray-cheeked grebe (Me.), horned grebe (Me., Mass., Tex.), pied-billed grebe (N. B., Me., N. J., Ohio, Ky.), common guillemot and bufflehead (Me.). From the distribution of this nomenclature, it would appear that the lower regions are more than ordinarily accessible from the State of Maine. Coming right to the point as to satanic qualities of the birds, the horned grebe is called diving devil in Illinois and the gray-cheeked grebe, red-eyed devil in Washington.

Leaving the birds of mysterious watery wanderings, we turn to other witch-, hell-, and devil-birds, so named for quite different reasons — part of which, indeed, are unknown. Sailors of the northeastern coast call a number of sea birds eggdowns, and hagdons, British provincial names, the meaning of which has been lost. When these terms are transformed to hag, or its diminutives haglet, or haglin, however, it is likely that the significance of "witch" is involved. Hag, alone, is applied to the: sooty shearwater (Nfd., Me., N. Y.), greater shearwater (Nfd., Labr., Northeastern Banks, Me., Mass.), and fulmar (Me.). The sooty shearwater is further known as black haglet (Mass.) and the greater shearwater as: gray haglet, haglet, and white haglet (Mass.), and haglin (N. B., Me.). Plainly called witches in the western Atlantic are the storm petrels, regarded as foreboders of tempests, and whose appearance, therefore, was by no means welcome to the crews of sailing ships.

"Witch" terms have been applied to three land birds for reasons the author is not able to explain. They include: witch bird for the phoebe (N. C.); witch's bird for the catbird (N. Y.); and tarkle (i.e. turtle) witch, a negro name for the hermit thrush in North Carolina.

The American bittern, a much-named species, utters calls, which in numerous cognomens, are likened to the sounds made by an old-fashioned wooden pump with its leathern sucker. To some these utterances have seemed of lower-world relationships, and, accordingly, they have denominated the bittern as hell-pumper (Iowa) and Devil's pump (Man.).

Four "Devil" folk-names require a like number of explanations. The pileated woodpecker is known as Devil's woodpecker in Nova Scotia, apparently because of its general black color and flaming crest. Very generally associated with Hell and the Devil in southeastern folk-lore is the blue jay (universally it is alleged to carry sticks or other fuel for the Devil every Friday); and it is called bird o' Satan by some Virginia negroes. In Pennsylvania, the jay has been stigmatized as blue devil by hunters because of its cries warning game of their approach. There are distinctly two sides to this matter, however, and the game, if it could, no doubt would highly reward the jay for this life-saving service. The white-breasted nuthatch gets the name of devil-down-head (Mass., N. Y.) for the devil-may-care notions it has about dizziness or the like disorders, for it seems utterly indifferent as to whether its head is up or down as it clambers about in the trees. There should be some satisfaction in progressing from Hell- and Devil- to God-names, but there is not, for in my opinion the American examples of the last class are all spurious. They pertain chiefly to the pileated woodpecker and appear to be mere corruptions of one of its most widespread folk-names, log-cock. Slight mishearing could transform this into log-god and that into lord-god. These and numerous other forms have been reported in folk speech, but any supernatural significance they may have is derivative and is based on misconceptions. For an account of these appellations, see McAtee, 1951 (pp. 93—94) and for additional "god-names", the same author 1945 (pp. 45—47).

Certain other cognomens having sacred implications trace to customs of the Indians. They have had little real currency among whites and due to the course of events are now practically obsolete. Both the golden and the bald eagles have been named Calumet eagle in books because their tail-feathers were used to decorate the calumets or pipes employed as symbols of peace or war, and were held of sacred signification by the Indians. Use of such feathers to embellish other ceremonial regalia of the redmen resulted in the following names that have been recorded form folk language: war eagle (the golden, S. Dak., Wyo.; and the bald, Minn.); and war bird and medicine bird (the road-runner, Colo.).

Both a sacred and a profane origin have been attributed to the sailors' name Mother Carey's chickens for the storm-petrels, generally regarded by sea farers as harbingers of storms. One theory is that this term is derived from *Mater cara* (dear mother), a name of the Blessed Virgin, but no litany contains such a title for the Virgin. At the other extreme, an author who writes the petrel name as Mother Carew's chickens, explains: "Mother Carew was an old witch ... good at raising the wind ... The sailors will not shoot them on any account; they pay them great respect, that their mother's wrath may not be roused." (McTaggart, 1829). The name has been applied on the northeastern coast (principally by sailors) to the white-rumped, storm, and Wilson's petrels, and has been modified to such forms as Carey chick or chicken, Carey, and pall Carey (the last for the white-rumped petrel in Newfoundland, on account of its darker color.

The petrels are storm presagers, and to judge fro folk names, various other birds are locally deemed as creatures of ill omen. A plain, bad-luck bird, is the common loon among the Sea Islands of Georgia; and a haunt bird in various parts of the South according to L. O. Pindar (ms.) is the nighthawk. Death bird is a local Floridian term for the smooth-billed ani, a species of black color and the object of other unfavorable associations; but much less explicably it is applied in Manitoba to the brown thrasher, a species generally very well regarded. Owls have nearly everywhere and always been considered as onimous fowl; in American names, this idea is reflected by, death owl, for the common screech or shivering owl (S. C., Ga., Ala., Miss.). Doubtless some evil portent is associated with a bird voice, that of the chuck-wills-widow at Okefinokee Swamp, Ga., which impels auditors when hearing it to remark 'the "Fontis Cat" is about'. (Harper, 1938.)

The cuckoos are called rain birds and the like, on account of their increased croaking before storms. That period, often of extra heat and heavy air, has in some quarters been credited with causing milk to sour, but in Maine the blame has been put on the yellow-billed cuckoo, or rain harbinger, itself, in the name, milk-sourer.

This chapter will be ended, as it was begun, with remarks on "spirit" birds, so-called, however, for different reasons. The idea of elusiveness enters into some of these terms also as it did in those for the spirit ducks. The yellow rail, a small straw-colored bird slipping through grasses and seasonally of matching coloration, is locally known as spirit rail in Illinois. The name-provoking yellow-billed cuckoo has the appellations, spirit bird and phantom bird, in Kentucky, doubtless because it is much heard but seldom seen. For its white color, the American egret is known as angel bird in Florida and ghost bird in Illinois, and for the same reason the snowy owl has been dubbed both ghost owl and ghost bird (Matthews, 1945). Fairy bird has been reported as a folk-name of the tufted titmouse in North Carolina, and will-o'-the-wisp, of the nighthawk in Connecticut and Colorado.

In New England, the designation, shad-spirit, has been fastened on three species of birds for closely allied reasons, connected with the annual advent of shad, the well-known food-fish, into the fresh-water streams of the region. One is the flicker, "whose note," it is said, "is ... held to indicate the first day when the fish ascend the river." (Essex County, Mass. T. W. Higginson, 1900). The same name was given to the jacksnipe, from its cry when startled by shad fishermen hauling their seines at night (New England coast,

G. B. Grinnell, Century Mag., Oct. 1883). And for the nighthawk, De Kay (1844) wrote "Along the Connecticut River the [booming] sound made by the ... [bird's] wings was said to be that of the Shad Spirit — announcing to the scholes of shad their impending fate."

A number of names of the gray or Canada jay have been given because these birds are fancied to be the embodied spirits of dead lumbermen. Such are cruiser's spirit (Wash.), lumberjack (Mich., Wis., Minn., Alta.), and old logger and woodman's ghost (N. Y.).

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NAMES OF THE AMERICAN BITTERN

From a long and general acquaintance with the names of North American birds, I have thought that were I to allow myself the pleasure of writing in non-technical fashion about the names of a single species, I would choose the bittern. Other forms as the Canada goose and flicker have a greater total of names; and the ruddy duck and hooded merganser have received some very piquant sobriquets, but for both varied and interesting cognomens, give me the bittern.

How much the word, bittern, itself, is used among the people, is difficult to decide, but at a venture I would say not a great deal. For one reason, there are too many localisms available for any need of a standard term to be felt. Bittern is a term of ancient lineage and many spellings, both in English and French, yet that variety is not so great but it is increased by American inventions. Thus bittern (N. C.), zettern (Nebr.), and sibitron (N. J.), appear in our collection. Conceivably the last is a condensation of the phrase, "it's a bittern."

Montagu in his Ornithological Dictionary (1813) called our species, freckled heron, and while he noted that some of the feathers are "speckled", it remained for Coues (Key to N. A. Birds, 1903) to back up his name with a pertinent description; he wrote: "Plumage of upper parts singularly freckled with brown of various shades, blackish, tawny, and whitish."

Of the heron family, the American bittern shares with its cousins a number of names, strict application of which has not been achieved. The well-known heron nickname, fly-up-the-creek, is rather widely assigned to the bittern (Wis., Ill., Mo., Ark., Man., Calif.) and the southeastern term, scoggin, and variants, also has due usage. The meaning of this name is debated. The surname of John Scoggin, court fool to Edward VI of England (1537—1553) is used allusively to mean jester or buffoon. Thus, as an importation and survival, it might be used to refer to the ungainly herons, to which numerous ridiculous epithets have been given. On the other hand, a correspondent suggests that "scoggin" is the name of a method of fishing, which would find natural application to herons. In that sense, the word has not reached the dictionaries so the debate can not now be settled. Scoggin, simply, has been heard as a bittern name in South Carolina; and as scroggin (Del.), scroggins

(Fla.), and squagin and ma'sh scawgin (N. C.); surely these are not all modes of fishing.

Birds of similar general appearance and habits are not always clearly separated by the public. Thus names usually applied to the black-crowned night-heron occasionally are offered as for the bittern, examples being: couac (French, Que., La.), quack (Ill.), quawk (Pa., N. J.), quock (Va.), squak (Wis., Utah), squawk (N. C., Fla., Wis., Ill.), squok (N. C.), and wop (Va.). A very characteristic name of the green heron, scow, also has been reported for the bittern in North Carolina. Of crane, a general misnomer for herons, the bittern has drawn a slight share. That simple term has been reported from Maine, Pennsylvania, and Arkansas, in addition to swamp crane and, worse, swamp duck, from Nova Scotia.

It is a folk-conceit to name wild birds, especially sizable species, as if they were poultry. Exemplifying this tendency by bittern appellations, we find that this bird is dubbed, Indian hen, from eastern Canada and Minnesota south to Georgia and Texas. Within this range, there prevails also the term Indian pullet (N. Y., S. C., Ga., Fla,. La.). Other hen-appellations include: bog hen (Me., Mass.), grass hen (S. C.), hethen (i.e., heath-hen, N. Y.), marsh hen (from Labrador and Saskatchewan to the northern tier of states, with single records form S. C., Ga., and Ala.), meadow hen (N. B., Me., Mass., N. Y.), mud hen (N. B., Que., N. Y., N. J., Pa., Ont., Mich., Man.), night hen (Mass.), sage (i.g., sedge) hen (D. C., N. C.), big water hen (Mo.), and weed hen (Ont.). The bird is known also as pond guinea in Mississippi.

Various herons "freeze" or stand still in a nearly erect position, but the bitterns seem to have this habit most strongly developed. It has often been described for the common bittern, for instance by Thoreau, from whose Journal we quote: "The bird stood in shallow water ... [quite] still, with its long bill pointed upwards in the same direction with its body and neck, so as perfectly to resemble a stake aslant." This habit has not escaped folk attention and it is the basis for a number of interesting names. Among them are, pump-handle (N. J.), stake bird (S. C.), statue bird (Wis.), and sun-dial bird (Fla.). This last appellation suggests resemblance of the obliquely rigid bittern to the pin, style, or gnomon of a sundial. Other cognomens resulting from the bill-pointing attitude of the bittern are: sky-gazer and star-gazer (Ga.), sun-gazer (Ala., La., Tex.), and look-up (N. Y.). All of these, together with the Louisiana French *garde-soleil*, *gaze-soleil* (look at the sun), and *vise en-l'air* (look in the air), are misconceptions, however, for while the bird's bill may be directed upward, its eyes are looking forward. That our greatest painter of birds — Louis Agassiz Fuertes — understood this is clear from his figure of the American bittern on Plate XXI of E. H. Forbush's, "Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States" (Vol. 2, Boston, 1925).

From a miscellany of bittern names, that of fool fowl (Ga.) may allude to the "freezing" habit, allowing the near approach of man. Bog-trotter (N. J., Ont., Mich., Minn.) is an obviously descriptive title for this bird of the fens, though it walks, and very slowly also, rather than trots. Fish-bird (Ohio) and snake-eater (La.) doubtless refer to food habits, but not necessarily major ones. Flying-fox (Del.) alludes to the prevalence of tawny-brown in its coloration, and shad bird and shad buck (Md.) relate to its being seen at the season of the shad fishery. Butterbird (Ga.) would seem to be connected with a sonic name, buttermunk, embodying the same prefix, which, however, has been reported from the State indicated. Pine-knot (N. S.) may refer to the toughness of flesh, and swamp-soggle (Wis.) may belong to the sonic class later discussed.

Three apparent personifications present themselves, but two of them may be more or less echoic. These are Jack Grindle (Ga.) and Johnnie Gongle (N. C.). The third, Nelly Bly (Ohio), is said to have been suggested by the globe-girdling of the author (Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman, 1867—1922) who used that pen-name. There was a ditty supposed to describe how the bittern walks and how Nelly got around the world in ninety days:

"When she walks she lifts her foot
And then she puts it down."

This is very good for the bittern, which, when stalking prey, raises each foot slowly and sets it down just as deliberately, but is not a gait well adapted to going places in a hurry as Nelly did in her time.

Peculiar as the names Indian hen, sun-dial bird, flying fox, and Nelly Bly may seem, none of them touches the real wealth of bittern names, which are those relating to its remarkable "love-song."

This has been likened to bellowing, booming, pounding, and pumping, and the bird has been supposed to invoke such outside effects as might be derived from placing its beak in a reed, or in water or mud. Thus of the European bittern, counterpart of our bird, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote (Canterbury Tales, The Wife of Bath, 1386) "As a Bitore bombleth in the Myre." And James Thomson (The Seasons. Spring, 1728) added,

> "The Bittern knows his time with bill ingulpht,
> To shake the surrounding marsh."

The water theory is innate in our American name, water-belcher, and the reed hypothesis was set forth by Thomas Browne in 1646 (Pseudodoxia Epidemica) as follows: "That a Bittor maketh that mugient noyse, or as we term it Bumping by putting its bill into a reed." Modern belief is that the bittern gulps air and forcing it out under pressure makes the sounds that have so impressed its namers.

The bellowing school has denominated the bird as a bull-goose (Ill.), bog-bull (Eastern Canada, New England, Mich., Ind., Ill.; a name also reported to be in British provincial use), bull-of-the-bog (Iowal. Walter Scott in "Guy Mannering 1815 also cites this term for the European bittern), and bull-of-the-woods (Ky.). Corroborative is the corrupt Pennsylvania-German, "Wassa-bull."

Names suggested by resemblance of the bittern "music" to resonant pounding include: barrel-maker (Mich.), corker (Nfd., i.g., caulker, or one driving oakum into the seams of a boat), pile-driver (Ont., Fla.), post-driver (Mass., Ill.), stake-driver (general), stump-driver (Vt., Mich.), and stump-knocker (N. Y.).

Likening the bittern's vocalization to the sounds made by the operation of an old-fashioned suction-pump has also been a fruitful source of folk-names. Among these allusions are: bog-pump (Minn., Sask.), bog-pumper (Minn.), marsh pump (Calif.), marsh pumper (Wis.), mud pump (Sask.), mud-pumper (Ont., Wis., Prairie Provinces), prairie pump (Mont.), pump-bird (B. C.), pumper (Mass., Minn., N. Dak., Alta.), pump-sucker (Ind., Ill., Wis.), slough-pump (N. Dak., Man., Sask.), slough-pumper (Wis., Ill., Minn., N. Dak.), swamp-pump (Mich., Calif.), swamp pumper (Wis.), and water-pumper (N. Dak.).

More fancifully, such terms veer to: pump-thunder (Vt., Mass., N. C., Ill., Man.), thunder pump and thunder pumper (general), Devil's pump (Man.), hell-pumper (Iowa), and bog-pumping hell-driver (Alta.), whatever that may mean.

A miscellaneous lot of names, each with a different reason for being, includes belcher-squelcher (Mass.), boomer (Mass., Pa., Ill., Colo., Calif.), grunter (N. J.), and thunder bird (Fla.). For the second of these, European analogy is indicated by a couplet from Walter Scott (The Lady of the Lake, 1810).

> "And the bittern sound his drum,
> Booming from the sedgy shallow."

So many sonic names to this point, and we have not yet dealt with those intended to represent the actual sounds made by the bittern. These terms exist in such variety as to indicate that the bird does not always call the same or that distance, intervening objects, or other factors, make the sound seem different under diverse conditions. Years ago on a quiet evening in May, after an all-day bird-trip, E. A. Preble, Alexander Wetmore, and the writer sat on a log at the edge of an extensive marsh at Dyke, Virginia, and listened to the repeated calling of a bittern, — at length with the purpose of deciding what word-sounds would best represent it. We decided on "plunk-a-lunk", which with numerous others is incorporated in the following list of onomats that have been applied to the bittern as names. (Others merely descriptive and not known to be used as cognomens could be cited.) The true sound names range almost from "a" to "z": Bill-gudgeon (Ont.), boom-pike (N. H.), bulleke-boo (N. J.), bull-squash (Va.), bum-cluck (Pa.), bunkum (N. B.), bunkalett (Pa.), butter-box (N. J.), butter-bump (Mass., Man.; a British provincial name traced to the year 1671 by the Oxford English Dictionary), butter-munk (Me.), doodle-doodle (N. J.), dunkadoo (N. Y., Pa., N. J.; satirized as "cockatoo"), full-pot (S. C.), hit-log (N. Y.), humpty-doo, hunch-apunchy, hunchy-puss (N. J.), junk-tuttle (Minn.), malugus (Fla.), comptah (Ont.), conk-onk (Mich.), plum-gudgeon (Ont.), plum-pudd'n (Mass., N. Y., Ont., Mich., Ill.), plunk-a-lunk (Pa., Va.), plunkett (Mass.), plunk-puddle (Mich.), pum-chick (Pa.), pumper-gor (Mass.), punkatunk (N. S.), punk-pudding (N. Y.), pussypuse (N. J.), skenk-doo (Calif.), slug-toot (Mass.), tom-te-bunk (Md.), and wollerkertoot (Mass.).

It is of interest to compare the Spanish *torcomon* (Mexico) and a few Indian names as syllabilized by white auditors: hounch-a-poro (Winnebago), mokoho (Cree), mo-pun-gwi (Goshute), and moosh-kah-oos (Chippewa). The same uncouthness, the same rhythm are evident as in the Caucasian folk-names, and the bird intended would be recognized by anyone familiar with the bittern's voice.

A much — and unconventionally — named bird, but interestingly so, withal.

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