

Book review

Birds of the World: Recommended English names

Frank Gill and Minturn Wright
Croom Helm & Princeton University Press, 2006
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The opening statement in this book is claimed to be an old Chinese proverb:

“Wisdom begins with putting the right name to a thing”.

However, an extensive literature and Internet search by this reviewer failed to turn up this quotation anywhere but in American birders’ emails. So, it might be appropriate to begin this review with another, verifiable, quotation:

“Great wisdom is generous; petty wisdom is contentious.” Chuang-tzu (369 BC-286 BC), *On Leveling All Things*.

Gill & Wright’s book is definitely contentious, in both its aim and its execution.

The OED defines “absurd” as meaning “being so senseless as to be laughable”. It is fortunately seldom that the “scientific” literature is graced by a work that might fit this definition, but this work is an exception. Its goal was “to recommend a set of unique English-language names for the extant species of the birds of the world”, and the names were to “conform to a set of rules formulated through a consensus of leading ornithologists worldwide”. But why?

The appearance of a work such as this makes me wonder if some ornithologists are bored and nostalgic for an earlier era when science could be dispensed with and the fun was in being the first to name something.

To demonstrate the emptiness of this book, I need do no more than quote from its very beginning (Page 1, indeed), where the authors remark on how the project appeared to their peers: “When one valued colleague saw our work in progress, he exclaimed, “what a waste of time!”. He was bent on saving the world oceans...” isn’t that what scientific names are for?” others asserted.” Indeed, to most of us, they are. Readers will be aware that birds and other organisms have common names (in whatever language you can imagine) and scientific names. Common names come and go with whims, linguistic changes, and theories, but scientific names (mostly) remain.

Of course, it makes sense that *Griseotyrannus aurantioatrocristatus* d’Orbigny & Lafresnaye, 1837 has a shorter “nick-name” for everyday use. To English speakers, it is the crowned slaty flycatcher but there are few Anglophones in its Amazon rain-forest home, so is there any reason for an English vernacular to be even coined, let alone foisted on other people? Is it really that difficult for monolingual Americans who nevertheless cope without trouble with *Rhododendron* and *Chrysanthemum*, to remember the Spanish “tyran oriflamme”? Far be it for me to raise the spectre of scientific Imperialism, but who if not the people who share their homes with species are entitled to have the casting vote in what their biota is called?

Anyway, back to the book. Page 1 also reveals that the names presented are supposed to be:

1. based on rules that simplify and standardize name construction;
2. selected to involve minimal use of hyphens for group names;
3. anglicized without glottal stops, accents, and the like;
4. based on interregional agreement and global consensus, with compromises;
5. selected with deference to long-established names;
6. aligned with current species taxonomy;
7. recommended for general adoption;
8. sponsored and endorsed by the IOC and by committee members.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I certainly appreciate guidance on how many hyphens to use in a name and thus a support the idea of some rules for this sort of thing, and the jury is still out (and likely to remain out) on whether we should use capitals or lower case, but why, oh why! should a common name be aligned with current species taxonomy. This is just silly. We all know that taxonomy changes continuously: what is a honeyeater 1 day can be a starling – or a kokako – the next. As knowledge increases, so must scientific taxonomy reflect that new knowledge.

Gill & Wright's 'Rules' can be summarized:

- Rule 1 - Prevailing usage would be the predominant guideline.
- Rule 2 - Local vernacular names would not prevail over established formal names.
- Rule 3 - If a name is offensive to a substantial group then it will be removed.
- Rule 4 - There would be only one name.
- Rule 5 - If birds have essentially the same name prefixes will be used.
- Rule 6 - In principle, English words are preferred.
- Rule 7 - No bias for or against patronyms.
- Rule 8 - Bird names may be single words or plural.
- Rule 9 - The word "Island" be removed from names unless "misleading".
- Rule 10 - Names including widespread words such as warbler for many groups would not be changed.

Thus, of these "rules" only the wording of 3, 4, 5 and 9 really makes them rules; the rest are, at best, guidelines. One important principle underlying all others is however, missing from the list. This should have been their Rule 1: Where a country has an active scientific/recreational birding community, *that community* should be charged with the task of naming its *endemic* taxa.

Table 1 is a list of primarily New Zealand endemic birds or groups that Gill & Wright have seen fit to alter from the forms used in the 1990 Checklist, or by prevailing usage in New Zealand.

The audacity, not to say stupidity, of some of these changes is breath-taking, and it shows that many of the "experts" involved in the production of this book were nothing more than enthusiastic birders. Despite what the authors think, the production of this book (if one accepts it should have been produced at all) should have been a taxonomically-driven task. Of all disciplines, taxonomy is the one that cannot be undertaken without a comprehensive knowledge of the literature. I illustrate this point with 3 examples.

First, take *Haematopus finschi*, a species that Gill & Wright (2006) call the South Island oystercatcher. The taxonomic history of this bird has unquestionably affected the choice of its common name. It was originally described as a separate species, then lumped as a subspecies of the Australian pied oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris*, and even the Eurasian oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*. More recently, a consensus has emerged that it is indeed a full species. For generations, New Zealand bird-watchers have happily called this species the South Island pied oystercatcher (and many affectionately know it as SIPO, for short). However, 2 species of oystercatcher breed in the South Island, so calling it South Island oystercatcher is meaningless. The name South Island pied oystercatcher is descriptive of its salient points of distinction, and is in common

usage: end of story! Seven of the 10 oystercatchers throughout the world are black and white, and one could argue that most people think of an oystercatcher as being black and white (= pied), so pied oystercatcher is not viable either.

Despite Rule 1 clearly stating that "Prevailing usage would be the predominant guideline", Gill & Wright have introduced 3 new usages in the Charadriidae to New Zealand to fit their bizarrely insular world view. The dotterel versus plover argument is comparatively recent and has nothing like the pedigree of the polemics over "shag and cormorant". Members of the Charadriidae had rather liberally interchangeable names, until English-language novo-Linnaeists (AngLinnaeists, if you will) began following the long lead given by Sibley & Monroe (1990).

So what is the definition of plover? Bizarrely again) the heading in the book clearly states that the Charadriidae are plovers. Does this mean that all members of the Charadriidae are plovers and none is a dotterel? Come on guys, make up your minds. Technically, there is only 1 dotterel, a Eurasian species now known as *Charadrius morinellus*, although previously it rejoiced in a genus of its own, (*Eudromias*) presumably because it has reversed sex roles. It is obviously a *Charadrius*. And one can also ask why all members of *Pluvialis*, except the grey plover *Pluvialis squatarola*, are "golden plovers" when none of them is a *Charadrius*? This issue reaches its nadir of inconsistency for us in New Zealand, where our banded dotterel *Charadrius bicinctus* was quite happy until the AngLinnaeists decided that it had to be a plover. Then, they decided that because there is a two-banded plover, *Charadrius falklandicus*, in South America, the 2 species might be confused (and not just the birds!) so they changed the name of the New Zealand bird to double-banded plover. First, the name banded dotterel could not be confused with anything, so a banded plover could not be confused with anything, either. Yet, so help me, still they changed it! The most liberal interpretation of the word 'plover' I can imagine might include any member of the genus *Charadrius*. But then, of course, you would have the Eurasian dotterel plover *Charadrius morinellus*. But, as *Charadrius* includes mostly plovers, I may be able to accept that. So, it is beyond comprehension why they then changed the shore plover *Thinornis novaeseelandiae* to shore dotterel.

Moving on to *Finschia novaeseelandiae*, the New Zealand brown creeper. So far as I can tell, the first publication to use the name "pipipi" as the primary 'English' name for the species was Sibley & Monroe (1990). When compiling their list of the birds of the world, those authors apparently noticed that there were 2 brown creepers, the New Zealand species and *Certhia americana* (not to mention, if you look across the Atlantic, the European *C. familiaris*). They

Table 1 Inconsistent application of their own Rules by Gill & Wright (2006) for New Zealand endemic taxa.

Scientific name	English name		Rules broken	Suggested name to conform to Rules
	Gill & Wright	1990 Checklist or prevailing usage in New Zealand		
<i>Phoebastria</i> sp.	Albatross	Sooty Albatross	1	Make both <i>Phoebastria</i> spp. Sooty Albatross.
<i>Thalassarche</i> sp.	Albatross	Mollymawk	1, 10	Use Mollymawk for all <i>Thalassarche</i> sp.
<i>Poliiocephalus rufopectus</i>	New Zealand Grebe	New Zealand Dabchick	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Anas superciliosa</i>	Pacific Black Duck	Grey Duck	1, 10	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Phalacrocorax varius</i>	Australian Pied Cormorant	Pied Shag	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Leucocarbo carunculatus</i>	Rough-faced Shag	King Shag	1, 5	Name <i>L. carunculatus</i> New Zealand King Shag and <i>L. albigenter</i> South American King Shag
<i>Leucocarbo chalconotus</i>	Bronze Shag	Stewart Island Shag	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Haematopus finschi</i>	South Island Oystercatcher	South Island Pied Oystercatcher	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Charadrius obscurus</i>	New Zealand Plover	New Zealand Dotterel	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Charadrius bicinctus</i>	Double-banded Plover	Banded Dotterel	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Thinornis novaeseelandiae</i>	Shore Dotterel	Shore Plover	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Procelsterna albigitula</i>	Grey Noddy	Grey Ternlet	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Gygis alba</i>	Angel Tern	White Tern	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Chrysococcyx lucidus</i>	Shining Bronze Cuckoo	Shining Cuckoo	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Xenicus gilviventris</i>	New Zealand Rockwren	Rock Wren	1, 5	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Anthornis melanura</i>	New Zealand Bellbird	Bellbird	1, 5	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Gerygone igata</i>	Grey Gerygone	Grey Warbler	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Gerygone albofrontata</i>	Chatham Gerygone	Chatham Warbler	1	Don't change Checklist name
<i>Finschia novaeseelandiae</i>	Pipipi	Brown Creeper	1, 2, 5	Rename <i>Certhia americana</i> Brown Treecreeper
<i>Megalurur punctatus</i>	New Zealand Fernbird	Fernbird	1, 5	Don't change Checklist name

Table 2 Use by Gill & Wright (2006) of international name for New Zealand taxa.

Scientific name used by Gill & Wright	English name	
	Gill & Wright	1990 Checklist
<i>Eudiptula minor</i>	Fairy Penguin	(Little) Blue Penguin
<i>Ardea alba</i>	Great Egret	White Heron
<i>Circus approximans</i>	Swamp Harrier	Australasian Harrier
<i>Gallirallus philippensis</i>	Buff-banded Rail	Banded Rail
<i>Porzana pusilla</i>	Baillon's Crake	Marsh Crake
<i>Himantopus leucocephalus</i>	White-headed Stilt	Pied Stilt
<i>Vanellus miles</i>	Masked Lapwing	Spur-winged Plover
<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	Kelp Gull	Southern Black-backed Gull

Table 3 Examples of inconsistent application of Rule 10 in Gill & Wright (2006).

Rule	Scientific name	Gill & Wright recommended English name
1	<i>Leucocarbo capensis</i>	Cape Cormorant
	<i>Leucocarbo bougainvillii</i>	Guanay Cormorant
	Rest of <i>Leucocarbo</i>	Shags
2	Charadriidae other than <i>Charadrius</i>	Dotterels
	<i>Charadrius morinellus</i>	Eurasian Dotterel
	Rest of <i>Charadrius</i>	Plovers
3	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>	European Golden Plover
	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	Pacific Golden Plover
	<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>	American Golden Plover
	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	Grey Plover
4	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>	Pomarine Skua
	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	Parasitic Jaeger
	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>	Long-tailed Jaeger

could not invoke the (then un-invented) “Rule 5”, so one imagines that Sibley & Monroe checked the 1970 OSNZ Checklist of the birds of New Zealand and found the quaint little “native” name pipipi, and it has been used by American birders ever since. Well, there are at least 3 problems with this:

- 1) The name pīpipi was chosen by members of the OSNZ Checklist Committee in 1970 as an act of remarkably forward-looking biculturalism, to complement, not replace, the current name. The name comes from William’s important 1906 treatise on Maori words. Williams did not present the word as the preferred Maori name, but simply as a Maori name he had heard or been told. Williams recorded 3 other names for *Finschia novaeseelandiae*: pipirihika; tītirihika; and toitoi. The only reason pipipi was preferred seems to have been because it was the **first** one given by Williams, although toitoi might have been dismissed as possibly causing confusion with the North Island tomiti.
- 2) It begs the question as to what is a preferred Maori name? *Finschia novaeseelandiae* occurs throughout the South Island. The different *iwi* there have a history of disagreements on land and other matters, and with language, local usage varies significantly. Consider for example, the place name pairs “Aoraki” and “Aorangi” and “Akaroa” and “Whangaroa”. As with Modern English and Americans, Maori were, and are, separated by a common language. It is unlikely there was ever a nationally consistent series of Maori names for birds.
- 3) Even if Rules 1 and 2 were valid, the correct Maori name is *not* pipipi but pīpipi. Transliterated without the macron, the word would be spelled “peepipi”. Such are the problems when linguistic nuances are interpreted by non-specialists.

So, what name did Gill & Wright plump for, for *Finschia novaeseelandiae*? A name that may or may

not be the preferred Maori name for a bird, one that is mis-spelt, and one that could conceivably cause offence to some Maori. Not an intended result, probably, but achieved nonetheless.

In some instances, the essence of Gill & Wright’s argument lies in changing the common name of a New Zealand endemic subspecies, or group of subspecies, to that of the species name used in Australia, or the rest of the World. I am prepared to concede that by sheer weight of opinion, the World will probably win, but I do feel sorry for poor old *Eudyptula minor* (and does this breach Rule 3?). For the record, I support many of these changes.

Another issue that rankles is that the scientific taxonomy in this book is also remarkably eclectic. The introduction states that the work supplements Dickinson (2003) and so one might expect the taxonomies to be similar, but no, not so. For example, Given *et al.* (2005) present evidence for separating *Larus novaehollandiae* from *Larus scopulinus* and Gill & Wright have adopted this, contrary to Dickinson (2003). On the other hand, despite 3 recent papers (discussion in Kushlan *et al.* 2005) having established that *Egretta (Casmerodius) modestus*, the eastern great egret is separate from *Egretta (Casmerodius) alba*, the western great egret, Gill & Wright continue to follow Dickinson in treating the taxa as: 1) an *Ardea*; and 2) a single species.

Conversely, while Gill & Wright follow Dickinson (2003), and all recent taxonomic work on albatross, in separating *Diomedea* (albatross) from *Thalassarche* (mollymawks), they do not follow this in their AngLinneaeen classification, because they then call all members of the 2 genera “albatross”, and do not recognize *Diomedea* as the albatross and *Thalassarche* as the mollymawks. Again, despite separating *Leucocarbo* from *Phalacrocorax* (contra Dickinson), they fail to call all the *Leucocarbo* shags.

As for the rule that common English names — proper nouns after all — should have initial capitals, I agree. After all, that’s what my Standard One

teacher taught me, and we do it for all other proper nouns, it's just that 90% of the World's scientific publishers (including OSNZ) do not.

Included with the book is a CD containing a copy of the Microsoft® Excel file that was used to produce the printed work. This is, of course, in today's Internet-crazed world, a masterstroke. Despite the copyright restrictions, I am sure that the list will immediately be adopted by hundreds of webmasters for their quirky little sites and will, by default and ubiquity, become the *status quo*. Anyone trying to change the way people see anything in the world should publish a web-site, or provide the raw materials for others to clone *ad nauseam*.

My advice to New Zealand ornithologists is to forget this book: I will. I only wish that the authors had done something productive with their time. There are genuine issues in relation to the taxonomy of the World's birds that have real implications for conservation. In today's fiscally responsible World, with restricted budgets for everything but armaments, whether or not a population of birds constitutes a separate species, and what scientific name we should give to that entity are real issues. Having dispensed with this book, I can get back to resolving some of these. Before I do, here are 2 more, genuine, quotations, which seem appropriate:

"You can know the name of a bird in all the languages of the world, but when you're finished, you'll know absolutely nothing whatever about the bird" (Richard Feynman: 1918-1988)

and

Mit der Dummheit kämpfen Götter selbst vergebens.
(von Schiller 1801; Act III, Scene 6)

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R. PAUL SCOFIELD
Canterbury Museum
Rolleston Avenue
CHRISTCHURCH