

**AOS North American Classification Committee**

**Supplemental Proposal Set 2020-S**

**24 July 2020**

No. Page Title

01 02 Change the English name of McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*)

### Change the English name of McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*)

#### Effect on the Check-list:

Approval of this proposal would result in a new English name for McCown's Longspur. We recommend that the committee adopt either Thick-billed Longspur or Shortgrass Longspur as the new name.

#### Background:

In 2018, the North American Classification Committee (NACC) considered and rejected a proposal to change the English name of McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*). We believe it is time for a new proposal on this topic, both because the NACC created new guidelines in 2019 that specifically address the issue of controversial and potentially offensive English names, and because recent events have reinforced the social imperative to be attentive to issues of racial justice, including the impact of some bird names. The 2019 guidelines explicitly note that present-day societal standards be considered when reviewing name changes. A new proposal also provides the opportunity to present more complete background research and diverse perspectives on the McCown's issue than were previously available.

#### The species named for McCown, and other ornithological contributions:

From 1849 to 1853, Captain John P. McCown of the U.S. Army was stationed at Fort Ringgold and Brownsville Barracks, two garrisons along the Rio Grande in southern Texas (Fischer 2001). While there, he observed and collected birds, sending his specimens to George N. Lawrence, a New York businessman and ornithologist. Lawrence published a series of papers on the more interesting of McCown's findings (Lawrence 1851a,b,c,d; 1853); these papers reported twelve species as new to the U.S., including some of the most characteristic species of the border region: Black-bellied Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna autumnalis*), Plain Chachalaca (*Oreortyx vetula*), Vermilion Flycatcher *Pyrocephalus rubinus*), Green Jay (*Cyanocorax yncas*), and Pyrrhuloxia (*Cardinalis sinuatus*).

In these papers, Lawrence also described three species new to science based on McCown's collections: Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*), Olive Sparrow (*Arremonops rufivirgatus*), and the longspur that he named for McCown, now *Rhynchophanes mccownii*. Regarding the longspur, Lawrence (1851c, p. 123) wrote the following:

It gives me pleasure to bestow upon this species the name of my friend, Capt. J. P. McCown, U. S. A., from whose collections, made on the southwestern frontier, many new birds have been added to our Fauna.

Two specimens were obtained by Capt. McCown on the high prairies of Western Texas. When killed, they were feeding in company with Shore Larks [Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*]. Although procured late in the spring, they still appear to be in their winter dress; in summer, I have no doubt they assume the gay and ornamented plumage of their congeners.

McCown, who was a good observer and an accurate recorder, later published a paper under his own name reporting observations of 17 species of birds from Texas (McCown 1853), including

lengthy accounts of some species (e.g., Greater Roadrunner *Geococcyx californianus*). Mearns and Mearns (1992) noted that Cassin later quoted extensively from Lawrence's and McCown's papers in his writings and incorporated notes personally sent to him by McCown, including a description of the behavior of the Hooded Oriole (*Icterus cucullatus*).

### **A brief synopsis of the life and military career of McCown:**

McCown (1815-1879) was born and raised near Sevierville in East Tennessee, a region in which slavery was little practiced. He attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, graduating in 1840, then served in Texas and fought in the Mexican-American War. Following the war, McCown was stationed on frontier duty along the Rio Grande, as noted above, and later served at other localities and campaigns, principally in the South and Midwest.

In May 1861, McCown resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to join the Confederate Army, just prior to Tennessee's secession in June. His performance in 1861-1862 resulted in successive promotions to major general, but McCown was court-martialed in March 1863 following the Battle of Stones River, Tennessee. Although he was charged with disobeying orders, the underlying reasons for the court-martial may have been his criticisms of commanding officer Braxton Bragg, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and other Confederate officials (Crist et al. 1995). Following the court-martial, McCown threatened to resign to go home and plant potatoes, and he pointedly characterized the Confederacy as "a damned stinking cotton oligarchy... gotten up for the benefit of Isham G. Harris and Jefferson Davis and their damned corrupt cliques" (Groce 2000, p. 88). (Isham Harris was the governor of Tennessee, the person considered most responsible for the secession of Tennessee from the Union.) Nevertheless, McCown returned to action following a six-month suspension. After the war he moved back to East Tennessee (Knoxville), where he taught school. He later moved to southwestern Arkansas, where his brother lived, dying there in 1879 (Mearns and Mearns 1992). His home in Arkansas included a "room of relics" from his past containing firearms from various wars, an original edition of Audubon's *The Birds of America*, and a Confederate flag, among other items (Mearns and Mearns 1992).

### **A consideration of "McCown's Longspur" against the background of today:**

Confederate symbols across the U.S. are currently being removed because of associations with white supremacy or a racist past that has rightfully been rejected. The continued use of Confederate symbols and honorifics ignores the propagation of racism and white supremacy that followed the Civil War and persists to the present day. Black, Indigenous, and other people of color continue to experience profound prejudice, discrimination, and violence.

The names McCown's Longspur and *Rhynchophanes mccownii* were not initially associated with the Confederacy; the bird was scientifically described ten years prior to the Civil War. These names are therefore not directly equivalent to the many overtly racist symbols created to recognize individuals for their roles in the Confederacy, often intended to perpetuate the racism associated with slavery and later forms of oppression. The social question here is more nuanced, involving the symbolism linked to this name due to post-naming events. Notwithstanding McCown's accomplishments as an ornithologist and his eventual misgivings about the Confederacy, he is perceived as a symbol of slavery and racism by many in today's ornithological and birding communities. This broader association of McCown with the Confederacy and what it represents has damaging ramifications for promoting diversity and inclusion within ornithology.

Ornithology is not exempt from racism. Racial minorities are underrepresented as birders, naturalists, and ornithologists, as was recently highlighted by the Twitter movements #BlackBirdersWeek and #BlackAFInStem. This underrepresentation is complex and multifaceted, but it is exacerbated by the presence of microaggressions, such as an English name honoring a high-ranking Confederate officer, regardless of when or how that name was originally created. There is obviously much work to be done, but removing an especially problematic eponym represents a step towards dismantling barriers for a more inclusive ornithological community.

### **Recommendation:**

A fundamental principle of nomenclature is stability. Consequently, as stated in our 2019 guidelines, proposals to replace long-established names must present strongly compelling reasons to override the benefits of stability and result in a change. The previous vote to retain “McCown’s Longspur” relied on his ornithological contributions, the fact that the name was not based on his war record, the lack of evidence associating McCown with slaveholding and his upbringing in a region of Tennessee generally opposed to slavery, and his statements disparaging the Confederacy and Confederate leaders. Although these factors continue to apply, our perspective on the ill effects of “McCown’s Longspur” has changed.

In light of current events, heightened awareness of racial issues, and widespread retirement of overt Confederate symbols, we consider the following factors to be of paramount importance, regardless of McCown’s personal views, accomplishments, or qualities: (1) he chose to resign his commission in the U.S. Army to play an important leadership role in the Confederate Army, and (2) a major defining cause of the Confederacy was defense of the institution of slavery. In view of these considerations, we recommend that the committee reverse its previous decision and change the English name of McCown’s Longspur.

### **Alternative English names:**

Several names have been suggested as replacements, including names based on plumage, morphology, distribution, and habitat.

*Names based on appearance.*—These include Rufous-winged Lark Bunting, Bay-winged Longspur, Black-breasted Longspur, Black-crowned Longspur, Belted Longspur, White-tailed Longspur, and Thick-billed Longspur. Some of these (e.g., Black-breasted Longspur, Black-crowned Longspur) refer to particular plumages (male breeding plumage), and others do not distinguish this species from other species of longspur (e.g., Lapland Longspur shows a belt or chest band in most plumages, Chestnut-collared Longspur also has an extensively white tail). Rufous-winged Longspur, after Lawrence’s name, and Bay-winged Longspur, a name from Coues (1894), refer to the posterior lesser and median coverts, most prominent on the breeding male but present to some extent in most plumages. Bay is a more accurate color (Ridgway 1901 termed it chestnut), and rufous wing patches are actually a conspicuous feature of another species of longspur (Lapland Longspur), especially in non-breeding plumage, so Rufous-winged is best avoided. Thick-billed Longspur refers the relatively stout, conical bill that inspired the name *Rhynchophanes* Baird, 1858. Ridgway (1901) also noted the “much larger and relatively thicker bill” compared to other species of longspur when recognizing *Rhynchophanes* as a genus distinct from *Calcarius* (Baird had described it as a subgenus). The more prominent bill distinguishes both male and female *Rhynchophanes mccownii* from all other species of longspur throughout the annual cycle.

*Names based on distribution or habitat.*—These include Prairie Longspur, Plains Longspur, Buffalo Longspur, and Shortgrass Longspur. Some of these refer to a region that overlaps only partially with the range (e.g., Prairie Longspur) or do not distinguish this species from other species of longspur (e.g., Chestnut-collared Longspur also breeds on the Great Plains). Buffalo Longspur reflects the large former herds in the range of the species, and their preference, especially in fall and winter, for heavily grazed areas. Shortgrass Longspur seems to describe the breeding habitat more precisely than Prairie Longspur or Plains Longspur.

We recommend either Thick-billed Longspur or Shortgrass Longspur, for the reasons cited above. Bay-winged Longspur would be a third possibility if a plumaged-based name is desired.

## Voting

Separate votes should be provided for (a) changing the English name of McCown's Longspur, and (b) adopting Thick-billed Longspur, Shortgrass Longspur, or some other new name. Due to the large number of suggested names, we propose that voting for new names occur in two rounds. In the first round, rank the top three names in order of preference. In the second round, the choice will be narrowed to the top two names based on votes received in the first round.

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