

**To:** Colleen Handel (President) and the Council of the American Ornithological Society (AOS)  
**From:** Steven Beissinger, Peter Marra, J. V. Remsen  
**Re:** Submission of a Resolution from AOS Fellows for a Moratorium on Changing Nonharmful Eponymous English Bird Names  
**Date:** 4 April 2024

On behalf of 231 Fellows of the American Ornithological Society (AOS), we submit the accompanying *Resolution for a Moratorium on Changing Nonharmful Eponymous English Bird Names*. The signers of this Resolution include many past Presidents and officers of the AOS and its predecessor societies, past editors of its journals and other publications, winners of its most prestigious research, conservation and service awards, Honorary Fellows of the society from 9 countries around the world, and individuals honored as Fellows. They are AOS members who have dedicated their professional lives to the scientific study and conservation of birds, leading the society, enacting its crucial functions through service in many varied capacities, and wisely managing its financial resources. Signers represent 65% of the 357 Fellows that we individually emailed, and they strongly outnumber those who declined to sign (7%) or did not respond (28%).

This Resolution grew out of widespread member discord with the decision to eliminate all eponymous English bird names and the process that led to it. The lack of transparency and opportunities for participation in a decision as subjective and broadly impactful as the use of eponymous English bird names is not how many of our members want this professional society to operate. Right now, a substantial number of AOS members feel disenfranchised and ignored.

Signatories to the Resolution have expressed many concerns. First, AOS leadership has not adequately considered the extraordinary cost in time and money that the renaming effort will divert from other critical societal priorities that directly benefit birds, ornithology, and AOS members. Second, the reasons presented in the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee Report for dismissing a case-by-case approach to evaluate proposed changes to eponymous bird names were unconvincing. Third, the decision to eliminate all eponymous English bird names does not address in a meaningful way the problem of increasing under-represented groups in ornithology because the degree that eponymous names act as a barrier to participation is unknown. Fourth, the decision will divert funds from effective measures that could directly engage these individuals. Fifth, it has alienated hundreds of AOS members and thousands of bird enthusiasts in the general public (see this [petition](#)).

The AOS Council made a unilateral decision when it announced the intention to eliminate all eponymous English names of birds that occur in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, the geographic ranges for only 8 of the 263 species with eponymous English names fall entirely within the US and Canada. Clearly, AOS had a strong obligation to engage in extensive national and international consultations and collaborations with global partners before it announced that it was pursuing a policy for changing eponymous English common names.

The decision to remove all eponymous English bird names places AOS as an outlier among scientific societies. None of our sister ornithological societies in Europe, Australia, Asia, Africa, South America, and the Caribbean have indicated they will take a similar approach to eponyms. Neither has the International Ornithological Union (IOU), Birdlife International, or the Trust for

Avian Systematics – three international organizations with responsibility for maintaining English names for birds of the world. Furthermore, no other taxonomic society (fish, plants, mammals, insects, etc.) has declared they will eliminate all eponymous common names. As a direct result of the AOS decision to replace all eponymous names, the AOS South American Checklist Committee has seceded and moved to the IOU. While one might conclude that AOS has taken on commendable global leadership on the societal issue of harmful bird names, the responses of other societies suggests that the AOS has made a hasty and incompletely considered decision.

Rather than further inflame the strong divisions (eponyms vs anti-eponyms) already apparent within the AOS and the general birding public by prescribing that AOS follow one approach for addressing eponymous English bird names, the 231 Fellows signing this Resolution are asking AOS leadership to enact a **moratorium** – take a pause to engage with its members and find commonalities among those with adversarial views. The Resolution requests that AOS Council undertake a more inclusive approach by engaging with a broader range of its members and others to inform its actions related to removing all eponymous bird names. This would include: (a) thorough and open discussion among the AOS membership; (b) seeking input from the general public and other North American and international ornithological societies; and (c) a formal poll of the membership to inform a decision of this magnitude.

**To initiate this process, we specifically ask AOS leadership to:**

1. Acknowledge the formal receipt of the Resolution through communication with all AOS members, including posting this letter, the Resolution, and our FAQ document on the AOS website along with a response from AOS leadership.

2. Open a broader set of communications and conversations with members about eponymous English bird names, the financial and social costs and benefits of name changes, and the broader issues about name changes that we have raised. This includes discussions at the 2024 annual meeting in Estes Park at both the Fellows meeting and an event for general members that can also be viewed virtually.

3. Thoroughly evaluate the case-by-case option for removing harmful eponymous English bird names. *Harmful English bird names should be changed, and we believe it sends a stronger message that AOS is committed to its goal of increasing diversity and inclusiveness if changes are restricted to offensive names, rather than replacing all eponymous bird names.*

Good governance dictates that organizations revisit and adaptively manage their decisions as new information is received, which AOS and its predecessor societies traditionally have done. We ask AOS leadership to pause and recognize that several aspects of the decision to eliminate all eponymous English names of Western Hemisphere birds announced on 1 November 2023 require further information, investigation, and consultation to determine the feasibility and desirability of this course of action.

**Resolution for a Moratorium on Changing Nonharmful Eponymous English Bird Names**  
4 April 2024

**To:** Colleen Handel, President, The American Ornithological Society (AOS)

**Re:** Concerning the 1 Nov. 2023 announcement and majority opinion by the AOS English Bird Names Committee (EBNC) that all eponymous English bird names in the Western Hemisphere be replaced.

**From:** Steven R. Beissinger, Peter P. Marra, James V. Remsen

This resolution requests reconsideration of the minority view of the EBNC report that states: *“The minority view is that potentially offensive names should be considered on a case-by-case basis, and that only those names which cause offense for reasons other than simply having been named after a person should be changed.”* Our reasons for requesting reconsideration include:

1. The 2800+ members of the AOS were not given a formal opportunity to provide input into this decision, in contrast to the broad engagement with AOS members on controversial decisions over the past decade, such as merging its predecessor societies (AOU and COS) and changing the names of its journals.
2. The debate over English bird names has become a highly divisive and publicized issue in the ornithological and birding communities (c.f. this [petition](#) and the comments from the general public).
3. The AOS should stand for tolerance and equity, but also for inclusivity in welcoming a diversity of opinions on such a subjective issue as eponymous bird names, which comprise less than 5% of our English bird names. An inclusive viewpoint would recognize that many people like inoffensive eponyms that honor deserving individuals, or prefer to avoid the disruption caused by numerous name changes.
4. The North American and South American Classification Committees, which have been in charge of designating English bird names for over a century, voted 20-1 to enact a case-by-case approach to name changes rather than a total removal of eponyms.
5. The AOS is an evidence-based scientific society with the capacity and resources to make case-by-case, transparent determinations about which individuals deserve to be honored with bird names, to consult experts from relevant fields, and to survey its members on their opinions about changing English bird names.

Therefore, we the undersigned ask the AOS leadership to proceed with a pilot project to replace obviously harmful names, but defer on replacing all eponymous names until a more inclusive approach is undertaken to inform the decision to remove all eponymous names, which would include:

- (a) thorough and open discussion among the AOS membership of this matter,
- (b) input from the general public and other North American and international ornithological societies is received, and
- (c) a formal poll of the membership is held to inform a decision of this magnitude.

**[Continued on next page with a list of the 231 Fellows who have signed]**

*Signed by 231 AOS Fellows as of 4 April 2024:*

**Past Presidents (AOS/AOU/COS):** Steven R. Beissinger<sup>3</sup>, Erica H. Dunn<sup>7</sup>, John Faaborg, Mercedes S. Foster<sup>1,2</sup>, Frank B. Gill<sup>3</sup>, Susan M. Haig<sup>5,7</sup>, Francis C. James<sup>5</sup>, Scott M. Lanyon<sup>7</sup>, Kathy Martin<sup>3</sup>, C. John Ralph<sup>7</sup>, John T. Rotenberry<sup>2,3,7</sup>, Glenn E. Walsberg<sup>2,7</sup>

**Past Officers (AOS/AOU/COS)<sup>1</sup>:** Jeffrey D. Brawn, Barbara E. Kus<sup>7</sup>, Stephen M. Russell, Frederick S. Sheldon<sup>7</sup>

**Past AOS Journal Editors and Associate Editors<sup>2</sup>:** Alan H. Brush<sup>7</sup>, David S. Dobkin<sup>7</sup>, Mark E. Hauber<sup>7</sup>, Walter D. Koenig<sup>3,5,7</sup>, Michael T. Murphy, Michael A. Patten<sup>7</sup>, Brett Sandercock<sup>7</sup>, Gary D. Schnell, James Sedinger, T. Scott Sillett, Phillip C. Stouffer<sup>7</sup>, Wesley W. Weathers, Timothy F. Wright

**Brewster Award Winners<sup>3</sup>:** Kenneth P. Able, Craig W. Benkman, Joanna Burger, Sidney A. Gauthreaux, Geoffrey E. Hill, Douglas W. Mock, Eugene S. Morton, Lewis W. Oring<sup>1</sup>, Robert B. Payne<sup>5</sup>, J.V. Remsen, Stephen I. Rothstein, Jr., Noel F.R. Snyder, Sandra L. Vehrencamp, Jeffrey R. Walters, Robert M. Zink

**Coues Award Winners<sup>4</sup>:** Bruce M. Beehler, P. Dee Boersma, Charles R. Brown, Joel L. Cracraft, André A Dhondt, Jared Diamond, Peter O. Dunn, Donald E. Kroodsma, Bruce E. Lyon, Peter P. Marra, Robert Montgomerie, Sievert Rohwer, Thomas B. Smith, F. Gary Stiles, Bridget J.M. Stutchbury, Linda A. Whittingham

**Miller Award Winners<sup>5</sup>:** Janice L. Dickinson, Peter R. Grant<sup>3</sup>, Keith A. Hobson<sup>4</sup>, Ellen D. Ketterson<sup>4</sup>, Gordon H. Orians<sup>3</sup>, A. Townsend Peterson, Trevor D. Price, Carol M. Vleck, John C. Wingfield<sup>4</sup>, Tony D Williams

**Schreiber Award Winners<sup>6</sup>:** David G. Ainley, Francesca J. Cuthbert, Scott R. Derrickson, Ralph J. Gutiérrez, Robert S. Ridgely, Lisa G. Sorenson, Eric A. VanderWerf, Joseph M. Wunderle Jr.

**Jenkinson/Stettenheim/Cooper Honorary Award Winners<sup>7</sup>:** Joseph R. Jehl, Jr., Lloyd F. Kiff, M. Ross Lein, Jay M. Sheppard, Carla Cicero Studley, Max C. Thompson

**Honorary Fellows:** Carlos Bosque (Venezuela), Franz Bairlein (Germany), Timothy R. Birkhead (UK), John Croxall (United Kingdom), Jon Fjeldså (Denmark), Joseph M. Forshaw (Australia), B. Rosemary Grant<sup>3,5</sup> (UK), Josep del Hoyo (Spain), Andrew E. McKechnie (South Africa), Manuel Nores (Argentina), Manuel A. Plenge (Peru), Richard Schodde (Australia)

**Fellows:** Alexandre Aleixo, David E. Andersen, Juan I. Areta, Keith A. Arnold, Todd W. Arnold, Robert A. Askins, Jonathan L. Atwood, Alexander V. Badyaev, George F. Barrowclough, James C. Bednarz, Matthew G. Betts, Robert O. Bierregaard, David M. Bird, John G. Blake, William M. Block, Peter Boag, Eric K. Bollinger, Rauri C.K. Bowie, Michael J. Braun, Leonard A. Brennan, Donald J. Brightsmith, Robb T. Brumfield, Sarah E. Bush, Carolee Caffrey, Angelo P. Capparella, R. Terry Chesser, Anne B. Clark, Dale H. Clayton, Nathan W. Cooper, Robert J. Cooper, Robert H. Day, Anthony W. Diamond, Paul F. Doherty, Jr., Carla J. Dove, Hugh Drummond, Renee A. Duckworth, David C. Duffy, Jon L. Dunn, John M. Eadie, Jessica R. Eberhard, Patricia Escalante-Pliego, Andrew Farnsworth, Alan Feduccia, Robert J. Fletcher, Charles Francis, Peter C. Frederick, Dale Gawlik, Kimball J. Garrett, Anthony J. Gaston, Gilles Gauthier, Cameron K. Ghalambor, H. Lisle Gibbs, Daniel D. Gibson, Robert E. Gill, Michael

Gochfeld, Gary R. Graves, Joseph A. Grzybowski, Susan J. Hannon, Steven L. Hilty, Janet G. Hinshaw, Rebecca L. Holberton, Dominique G. Homberger, Peter Houde, Kate P. Huyvaert, Eduardo E. Inigo Elias, Morton L. Isler, Jerome A. Jackson, Alex E. Jahn, Fabian M. Jaksic, Leo Joseph, Jeremy J. Kirchman, Steven C. Latta, Douglas J. Levey, Haw Chuan Lim, Michael P. Lombardo, Irby J. Lovette, Andrew Mack, Jeffrey S. Marks, John M. Marzluff, John E. McCormack, Scott R. McWilliams, David P. Mindell, Miguel A. Mora, Douglass H. Morse, Michael L. Morrison, Robert G. Moyle, J. P. Myers, Adolfo G. Navarro-Sigüenza, Gerald J. Niemi, Barry R. Noon, John P. O'Neill, Alan F. Poole, Harry W. Power, J. Jordan Price, H. Douglas Pratt, Stephen Pruett-Jones, J. Michael Reed, Mark B. Robbins, Scott K. Robinson, W. Douglas Robinson, Kenneth V. Rosenberg, Dustin R. Rubenstein, William A. Searcy, Çağan H. Şekercioğlu, John A. Smallwood, Stephan J Schoech, Betty Anne Schreiber, Peter B. Stacey, Karen Steenhof, Scott H. Stoleson, Paul Sweet, Sabrina S. Taylor, Stanley A. Temple, Max C. Thompson, Charles F. Thompson, Rodger D. Titman, Diana F. Tomback, Christopher M. Tonra, Philip Unitt, Marc-André Villard, Gary Voelker, Margaret A. Voss, Michael P. Ward, Doris J. Watt, David F. Westneat, Nathaniel T. Wheelwright, Bret M. Whitney, Karen L. Wiebe, David S. Wilcove, R. Haven Wiley, Joseph B. Williams, Chris C. Witt, Blair O. Wolf, Ken Yasukawa, Liana Y. Zanette

## FAQ About Changing Eponymous English Bird Names (EEBNs)

4 April 2024

Steven Beissinger, Peter Marra, James V. Remsen

**1. What bird species does AOS have jurisdiction over their English names?** AOS has been responsible for designating the English names of all bird species that occur in the Western Hemisphere. The AOS North American Classification Committee (NACC) and the South American Classification Committee (SACC) have made decisions on bird names since 1886 and 1999, respectively.

**2. Who made the decision to remove all EEBNs?** In 2021 the AOS Council appointed an Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee to serve in an advisory role. Its charge was to: (1) gather information about how AOS members, other ornithologists, and the broader birding public feel about eponymous English bird names through a professionally administered survey<sup>1</sup>; and (2) make recommendations for a process that will allow the AOS to change harmful and exclusionary English bird names for species within its purview<sup>2</sup>. Instead of following its charge, the Ad Hoc Committee claimed it was too difficult to devise a process and recommended elimination of all 152 eponymous English names on the NACC list and 111 on the SACC checklist. AOS Council voted to approve this recommendation on 7 August 2023. Council members were sworn to secrecy until the decision was announced on 1 November 2023.

**3. Is it intractable to take a case-by-case approach to determine which EEBNs should be changed?** It depends on who you ask. The Ad Hoc Committee thought so. However, the NACC showed it was possible when they changed McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) to Thick-billed Longspur in fall 2020 in response to social justice concerns about McCown's service as a Confederate general in the Civil War. Moreover, most universities have developed principles for naming and renaming buildings. Municipalities have done the same for streets, parks and public spaces, as has the US Dept. of Interior for features with derogatory names. Compiling and adapting the principles used and the criteria established by other organizations should have been a key part of the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee's efforts and report. We are unaware of any other organization that has decided to remove all eponymous names for other taxa or for buildings, streets, etc.

**4. Did the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee consult with the North American and South American Classification Committees about making name changes?** Not in a meaningful way. In June 2023, NACC and SACC were given two weeks to respond to the draft report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the condition that its contents and recommendations be kept secret. There were no joint meetings of the committees and no attempt was made to find consensus. NACC and SACC were not given a chance to respond to the final report.

**5. Are the North American and South American Classification Committees in favor of changing all EEBNs?** No. NACC voted 12-0 and SACC voted 9-1 against the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee's recommendation to do away with all eponymous names, instead

recommending name changes on a case-by-case basis. NACC and SACC provided detailed comments on why doing away with all eponymous names was not a wise decision.

**6. Did the AOS poll its members about changing EEBNs?** No, even though it was part of the charge to the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee. The Committee claimed it would not be able to administer and analyze a poll. But even a very targeted poll would have elucidated the membership's attitude toward changing all EEBNs, changing them on a case-by-case basis, or whether any eponymous name should be changed. A survey would have indicated how important this issue is to AOS members relative to other issues facing birds and the AOS today. Polling its members for their perspectives was key to informing AOS leaders making the difficult decisions to merge their predecessor societies and to change the names of its journals. AOS members expect to have their voices heard by their elected leaders when controversial decisions are being made.

**7. But wasn't there a public event about English bird names that AOS held?** On 16 April 2021 the AOS held an online "Community Congress on English Bird Names" that was organized by the Diversity & Inclusion Committee. This was not a forum on whether eponymous names should be changed (presenters were all in favor of name changes). It focused discussion on the feasibility of changing names primarily from the perspectives of those involved in bird monitoring programs and authors of field guides. The leaders of NACC and SACC did not participate in this event and the individuals they suggested as panelists were not selected. The Community Congress was held before AOS had established the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee. Two information sessions ("Community Forums") with AOS officers were held after announcing the elimination of eponymous names (7, 8 Nov. 2023).

**8. Did AOS consult with other Western Hemisphere ornithological societies about changing EEBNs?** No. The AOS made a unilateral decision despite the fact that geographic ranges for only 8 of the 263 species with eponymous English names fall entirely within the US and Canada.

**9. Will other organizations follow the lead of AOS and eliminate all eponymous bird names?** This seems unlikely. The International Ornithologists' Union (IOU), which maintains a list of English names for all birds of the world, have indicated they are not in favor of removing eponyms. The South American Classification Committee is now affiliated with the Working Group on Avian Checklists of the IOU and will consider name changes on a case-by-case basis.

**10. What are the repercussions of the decision to do away with all eponymous English bird names?** Frustrated AOS members have publicly resigned from the society including award winners and past editors of its journals. Other members have publicly stated they will no longer attend meetings, resigned from committees, and withdrawn manuscripts from AOS journals. The South American Classification Committee has seceded from AOS and is now affiliated with the International Ornithologists' Union. [Public opinion](#) appears to be decidedly against doing away with all eponymous bird names. An online [petition](#) to enact a case-by-case method to remove offensive names has been signed by over 6200 individuals and is growing.

**11. Why is stability important for English bird names?** Stability of English bird names is very important for communication among scientists and the general public. Standardization and stability of English names was a major mission of AOS and the NACC since its founding in 1886. Some changes to English names are inevitable due to changes in species limits and efforts to standardize English names world-wide. Since 1998, an average of 1 English bird name has been changed per year by the NACC.

**12. How long will it take and how much money will it cost to change all of the EEBNs?** We don't know yet, but one estimate from AOS leadership suggested it may require 10 years and \$1 million dollars just to change the names of North American birds. A pilot project to develop a process for 5-10 species has been funded for ~\$130,000, which equates to \$46 per AOS member. Moreover, there will be costs to governmental and other organizations for updating interpretive signs, educational materials, websites, and databases. Professional bird tour guides throughout the Western Hemisphere will need to purchase new bird guides or apps, and learn new common names to communicate with their customers. The new names will also cause confusion for the public.

**13. Does AOS leadership know about the Resolution calling for a moratorium on changing all EEBNs?** Yes. The Resolution was discussed multiple times with AOS President Handel and President-Elect Morris as it was being drafted and as it has progressed through various stages of accruing signers.

**14. Is the Resolution and other pushback against the decision to rid English Bird names of eponyms a result of racists and others opposed to being inclusive in ornithology?** Absolutely not. We recognize that as messengers we will be subject to various labels by individuals who don't want to hear our message. Moreover, nearly everyone who signed the Resolution expressed their interest in changing harmful EEBNs and in retaining inoffensive eponyms that preserve the history of ornithology and the AOS.

**15. Won't this Resolution be divisive and cause further strife?** Actually, just the opposite. Harmful English bird names should be changed, and it sends a stronger message that the AOS is committed to its goal of increasing diversity and inclusiveness if name changes are restricted to those people, rather than replacing all eponymous English names. We believe there is an opportunity to mobilize and unite AOS members and birders in the Western Hemisphere by implementing a case-by-case approach to eliminate harmful English bird names. While sadly this initial opportunity was lost, AOS can modify its decision and move forward where there is a near consensus to eliminate harmful bird names.

---

**Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> AOS Council meeting minutes: 2 June 2021, 27 June 2022, 6 August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee Recommendations for Council of the American Ornithological Society (AOS). ([link](#))