

FOLK NAMES OF NEW YORK BIRDS: I

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Thomas Penant, the British naturalist, in his "Arctic Zoology," 1785, recorded 101 species of birds from New York State and gave popular names for several of them. That was a good start, but when Gurdon Trumbull of Connecticut came along, he combed the shores of Long Island for his "Names and Portraits of Birds which Interest Gunners," a book published in 1888, to which we owe much of what we know of this subject.

The present list, a gathering from these and other books and from a variety of sources, is extracted from a large manuscript by the writer on "American Bird Names, Their Histories and Meanings," which seems unlikely to be published in its entirety. An effort is being made, therefore, to publish local representations of the folk names — the most interesting part of all. The card catalogues on which these reports are based may be consulted for fuller details in the Fuertes Memorial Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. Compilation ceased with the year 1947, hence names first published after that year will not be found herein. Many unpublished names are included, however, that were obtained by field research and from answers to questionnaires.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

Common Loon. Big loon; big ring-neck loon (the greenish-black throat of adults is interrupted by a more or less complete collar of sharply-defined vertical white streaks); diver; great loon; hell-diver (in reference to its uncanny diving ability); loon (probably from a common cry, ah-loo, repeated); sea loon; wheel-barrow (from its labored take-off into flight).

Red-throated Loon. Gray loon.

Holboell's Grebe. Bastard loon (too big for a grebe, too small for a loon; it might be a hybrid); hell-diver (see note under common loon); sheldrake loon (the loon-like bird that resembles a sheldrake or merganser, at least in size).

Horned Grebe. Dipper (as a habitual diver); hell-diver (see note under common loon); pink-eyed diver (the iris is red); water-witch (refers to the bird's uncanny diving ability. This name was recorded for New York by Pennant in 1785).

Pied-billed Grebe. Dabchick (the bird that dabs or dives; of old usage for the little grebe in Great Britain, where recorded as early as 1667, Merrett); didapper (a shortening of dive-dapper, both parts of which refer to diving. Similarly traceable to 1565-1567 in Great Britain, Oxford English Dictionary); dipper (—diver); hell-diver (see note under common loon); hen-beaked wigeon (Pennant 1785. Wigeon here means duck, a misnomer often applied to this bird. Hen-beaked signifies that its bill is similar in shape to that of the domestic fowl); mud-duck (any small water bird may be called a duck; this one associated with mud by some observers); water-witch (see note under the preceding species).

Sooty Shearwater. Black hagdon, hag (the bird is dark sooty-brown above; hagdon is from hagdown, an English term, the derivation of which is unknown; "hag," by itself, doubtless has some derogatory significance).

Great Shearwater. Hagdon (see preceding note).

Leach's Petrel. Mother Carey's chicken (chicken, a bird; for the remainder of the name, a variety of derivations have been suggested; one having dictionary (NID) sanction is that the term is an Anglicization the Latin, Mater Cara (Esteemed Mother) applied to the Virgin Mary, patroness of sailors. As these birds are regarded as portents of trouble, however, the connection does not seem too clear. A popular explanation is: "Mother Carew was an old witch . . . good at raising the wind . . . The sailors will not shoot [the petrels] on any account; they pay them great respect, that their mother's wrath may not be roused" (Mactaggart, 1829, I, 12).

Storm Petrel. Black imp (except for the white rump, the bird is most dark; "imp" agrees with numerous associations of petrels with evil powers, as they are supposed

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to be harbingers of storms); Mother Carey's chicken (see note under the preceding species); stormy (a familiar form of the standard name, perhaps known only to the book-learned).

Wilson's Petrel. Mother Carey's chicken (see note under Leach's petrel).

Gannet. That name is in general use along the coast. It is an old word known from the epic of Beowulf, about 1000 A. D.; and comes from the same root as gander.

Common Cormorant. Nigger goose; shag (see notes under the following species).

Double-crested Cormorant. Nigger goose (in allusion to its color and to its goose-like appearance, especially when in flight in the V-formation so closely associated with the Canada goose); sea-crow (though seen upon the sea, the cormorant has no resemblance to a crow except in color); shag (by transfer from England, where this name of long usage refers to the shaggy crest).

Great Blue Heron. Blue crane; crane (herons are commonly miscalled cranes); high-boy (in allusion to its tall stature); old Job (Job is a commiserative term, apparently suggested by the heron's scrawniness; old an adjective of familiarity).

American Egret. White bird; white crane (color is mostly white; herons are commonly miscalled cranes).

Snowy Egret. White crane (see the preceding note); white quawk (the term quawk, suggestive of the raucous vocalization of herons, is most frequently applied to the black-crowned night heron).

Little Blue Heron. Blue crane; little blue crane (general color of the body and wings of adults is dark bluish-gray; herons are commonly miscalled cranes); little white crane, white crane (immature birds are chiefly white).

Green Heron. Blue bittern (in high plumage, the elongated feathers of the back are bluish; the name bittern is applied to various herons other than those to which it properly belongs); blue Peter (see preceding note; "Peter" a familiar or "pet" name. The combination is more frequently bestowed on the American coot and for a definite reason); fly-up-the-creek (it is seen along small streams more frequently than are other herons); skowk (imitation of a cry often made by the bird when it is flushed).

Black-crowned Night Heron. Blue heron (color of adults above is largely pale, bluish-gray); meadow-hen (a sizable bird, thus a "hen", that frequents meadows, in the New England sense of wet grasslands); qua-bird, quack, quawk, quawker, quok, squawk (all of these names are descriptive of a common call).

American Bittern. Dunkadoo (imitation of a common note; many bittern names are so derived; others in this list are labelled merely "sonic"); hethen (that is, heathen, heath being used as a synonym for marsh); hit-log (at a distance the notes suggest resonant pounding); Indian pullet (a sizable bird that might have been poultry of the Indians; the common significance of the name, however, is small wild hen); look-up (from the bird's pose when "freezing"; although the bill points upward, the eyes look forward); marsh hen, meadow hen (a sizable bird of marshes or meadows); mud hen (a good-sized bird of muddy environment); plum-pudden, punk-pudding (sonic); stake-driver, stump-knocker (at a distance the notes suggest resonant pounding); thunder-pump (the notes suggest the sounds made by an old-fashioned suction-pump but they are hardly as loud as thunder).

Whistling Swan. Wild swan.

Canada Goose. Brant (sometimes this distinguishes the subspecies hutchinsi); common goose; gray goose; honker (from its notes); mud goose (a special name for the Hutchins subspecies); white-breasted goose (to distinguish it from the sea brant with its black breast, though the Canada's breast is not always white); wild goose.

American Brant. Brant, leatherhead (deemed hard to kill).

Snow Goose. White brant; white goose.

Mallard. Gray duck; gray mallard (these two names sometimes mean only the female, but are often applied to the species); greenhead (only the adult male has a green head); mallard (in olden usage this meant only the male; the female was the duck; and the species duck and mallard).

Black Duck. Black mallard or simply "black" (these names are in general use though the general color of the bird is dusky-brown rather than black); coot (perhaps as resembling in color female sea-coots or scoters); dusky duck (Latham 1785); long-necker black; marsh duck; old duck; redleg (adult males have the reddest legs); short-necked black (this and an earlier term to the opposite effect may reflect a popular trend to recognize two kinds of black ducks; scientists tried that too, but the present view is that all the differences are related to sex and/or degree of maturity).

Gadwall. Creek duck (from its preference for small waters); gadwall (rather widely used, etymology unknown); gray duck (the male is predominantly grayish); speckle-belly (the breast of the male has dark scale-like markings, but the belly in both sexes is glaringly white, especially as seen in flight); widgeon (a name applied rather generally to medium-sized ducks, and even to other birds, but recognized as standard only for the baldpates).

Pintail. Bluebill (a name reported by Peter Kalm in 1748; the bill of the adult male is in part bluish-gray); gray duck (sometimes means only the female); longtail duck (the middle tail feathers of the male are conspicuously elongated); marsh duck; peaked-tail, pentail (see preceding note); pied gray duck (the male); pile-start (transliteration of the name pylstaart in the Dutch edition of Kalm's Travels, 1773. Freely translated, it means lance-tail and is in allusion to the long pointed tail of the male); pintail (a general name, also in British provincial use; refers to the long, pointed tail of the male); spindle-tail; spreet-tail (these two names have a similar reference; 'spreet' is dialect for sprit, the stay of the mainsail of a small boat); sprig; sprig-tail (two more names referring to the long tail of the male); winter duck (also in British provincial use, Smellie 1793).

Green-winged Teal. Common teal; green-wing (only the speculum is green); winter teal (as being present in more severe weather than is the blue-wing); teal; teal duck.

Blue-winged Teal. Blue-wing (the wing coverts, and in the male, adjacent feathers, are light blue); summer teal (in southern migration, it arrives early, usually in August); teal; teal duck.

European Widgeon. English widgeon; marsh duck; widgeon.

Baldpate. That name is in general use (the head of the male, bill to crown, is white, but not bald); gray duck; marsh duck; white-face (see first note); widgeon; widgeon duck.

Shoveler. Most of the folk-names of this bird refer to its spatulate bill. Those in general use or definitely recorded for New York are: broadbill, shovel-bill, shoveler, shovel-nose, spoonbill, spoonbill duck, and spoony.

Wood Duck. That name and the contraction, "woody," are known for New York. The bird perches on trees, nests in their cavities, and lives mostly in wooded swamps.

Redhead. That name is in general use (the head and upper neck of the male are reddish-chestnut); red-head duck; red-headed broadbill (to distinguish it from the scaups known also as broadbills).

Canvasback. That name is general, as are also the nicknames, "can", "canvas", and "cannie" (the coloration of the back suggests the fabric, canvas); canvas duck; Seetock duck (spelled also Seetog duck; for a stream tributary to Great South Bay, that was especially frequented by these birds).

Ring-necked Duck. Bastard broadbill (recognized as allied to the scaups or broadbills, but yet different, so deemed a hybrid); blackhead (another name shared with the scaups. The head of the male is black, but with varied metallic reflections); marsh bluebill (scaups also are called bluebills; this one thought to be more of a marsh, than a bay, frequenter); ringbill or ring-bill duck (from the pale crossband near the front end of the bill, present in both sexes).

Greater Scaup. Bay blackhead (the head, neck, and upper breast of the male are black, with greenish reflections); bay broadbill (the bill, about an inch across near the tip, is perhaps relatively broader than in its allies); big blackhead; big bluebill (the bill is dull blue or lead-color); big broadbill; blackhead; bluebill; bluebill duck; broadbill; broadbill duck, broadbill widgeon (almost any medium-sized duck may be called a widgeon); deep-water broadbill; greater blue-bill; lake blue-bill, laker (Lake Ontario terms); mussel duck (from feeding on mussels; also in British use); winter broadbill.

Lesser Scaup. Blackhead (the head of the male is black, with purplish gloss); bluebill; bluebill duck (same explanation as under the preceding species); broadbill; creek broadbill (from preferring smaller water than does the preceding species or bay broadbill); little blackhead; little bluebill; little broadbill; marsh bluebill; mud broadbill; river bluebill; river broadbill; river scaup (there is little evidence of folk use of the British term "scaup" in America. It refers to the bird's feeding on scaups or scalps, that is, beds of shellfish); swamp bluebill.

Common Goldeneye. Brass-eye (the iris is pale (female), to bright (male), golden-yellow); brass-eyed whistler (latter term from the sound made by the wings in flight);

brownhead (the female and young with snuff-brown heads; that of the male is black with greenish reflections); golden-eye; great-head (the head is puffy with feathers); pied whistler (the male); whistler, whistle-wing (also in Irish local use).

Bufflehead. Butterball (from being often excessively fat); didapper (a name more generally applied to grebes; see note under pied-bill grebe); dipper (that is, a diver); hairy-crown hairy-head (there is an abundance of long soft feathers on the head); spirit duck (in reference to its "supernatural" ability in diving at the flash of an old-time gun or at the twang of a bowstring, quickly enough to avoid the missile).

Old Squaw. Cockawee, coween (in imitation of its notes); long-tailed duck (the middle tail feathers of the male are elongated); old Injun (the male, as mate to the old squaw — a more common name); old mammy; old squaw; old wife (these names refer to the bird's "garrulity"); ow-owly; south-southerly, south-south southerly (in imitation of its notes); squaw; squaw duck.

Harlequin Duck. Lord (that much of the more northeastern name, "lords and ladies", in reference to the handsome plumage of the male).

Labrador Duck. Though extinct since 1878, this species is known to have had at least the following folk names in New York: pied duck, skunk duck, and skunk-head. All had reference to its bold black and white markings.

Common Eider. Big sea duck; black and white coot; eider; Isles of Shoals duck (from a wintering ground off the coast of New Hampshire); looby (probably means "booby", as being clumsy or foolish); sea coot; Shoal Island duck (same as Isles of Shoals duck); wamp (from an Indian name, meaning white; the plumage of the male, seen as it sits on the water, is chiefly white).

King Eider. Isles of Shoals duck (see note under the preceding species).

White-winged Scoter. Bay coot; black duck (the plumage of the male is largely black above); brant coot (from its large size among coots); coot; old gray coot (the female is sooty above and grayish below); rock coot (from frequenting ledges); surf duck; white-wing, white-wing coot (the speculum is white).

Surf Scoter. Bald-headed coot (from the white spots on the head of the adult male); black coot, black duck, black sea duck (the plumage of the male is largely black above); box coot (possibly this name has reference to the enlarged basal portion of the bill of the male); butterboat-bill (the swollen bill of the male inverted, might be likened in form to the dish known as butterboat); china-bill coot (the varied color of the bill of the adult male may suggest that of decorated china-ware); coot; gray coot, little gray coot (the female and young, which, however, are brownish rather than grayish); morocco-jaw (part of the bill of the male, being orange to red, may have suggested this name); patch-poll coot (the adult male has two large, triangular, white spots on the head); rock coot (from its frequenting ledges); rotten-bill (the varied color of the beak of the adult male, including white, pink, orange, red, and black, may suggest something decomposing); sea coot; skunk-head (from the black and white coloration of the head of the male); spectacled coot, spectacle duck (round markings on the bill of the adult male suggest spectacles); surf coot; surf duck; white-bill coot (the bill of the adult male is partly white); white-head (there are two large white spots on the head of the adult male).

Black Scoter. Beetle-head (the inflated beak of the male remotely suggesting a beetle or maul); black coot (the general color of the adult male is black); booby duck (a clumsy or foolish one); broad-billed coot; butter-bill (the bill of the male is yellow at base); coot (also in British provincial use); coot duck; hollow-billed coot (the bill of the male is inflated basally); rock coot; surf duck (also in British provincial use); whistling coot (from the sound made by the wings in flight); yellow-billed coot, yellow-nosed coot (the bill of the male is yellow basally).

Ruddy Duck. Booby, booby coot (as being often lethargic or unsuspicious of man); bumble-bee coot (from its small size and the rapid motion of its wings in flight); butterball (from its being often excessively fat); chunk, chunk duck (in allusion to its small size and "blocky" build); coot; dipper (that is, diver); fool duck (see note under booby); looby (equals booby, which see); salt-water teal (teal from its small size); spiketail (the tail feathers are pointed and are often held erect); spoon-billed butterball (the bill is somewhat expanded apically (see note on butterball); stick-tail, stick-tail duck; stiff tail (same note as for spiketail).

(to be continued)