

THE GREAT COMMON NAME DEBATE

Your chance for input

The title of this column should perhaps be 'the common name débâcle', such is the controversy that surrounds the question of what common names we should use for birds. Few issues provoke more heated debate. Even European and North American birders have seemingly endless fights over appropriate common names, and the relatively small South African birding community argues over Afrikaans names... We are loathe to enter the fray, but in the absence of a formal committee to decide on a uniform

set of common English names, we need to come to some understanding for the revision of *Roberts'*.

In an ideal world, we would have a single, unique common name for each bird species, just as we have a unique scientific name for each species. The reality we face, however, is that there are regional differences in common names. The problem is that, with the increasingly global view of birds, from both conservation and recreational perspectives, there is a need to standardize common names and avoid parochialisms.

There are effectively two problems that have to be addressed. One involves the same name being used for more than one bird, the other is having more than one name for the same bird. Of the two, the latter is the more controversial because it is arbitrary which among a suite of potential names is chosen.



Common name confusion: Cisticola tinniens, Levallant's Cisticola in southern Africa, is called Tinkling Cisticola in East Africa. But Tinkling Cisticola is the southern African name for C. rufilatus, which is called Grey Cisticola farther north in Africa!

To address these problems in a southern African context, we propose a set of simple rules for name changes. As guiding principles, the name used should be the simplest (shortest) unique name and, wherever possible, no change should be made to existing common names currently in use in southern Africa. However, changes should be made in the following instances:

- Where the same common name is used for more than one species, suitable descriptors (principally geographic) should be added to the name to avoid ambiguity (for example, *Southern Black Flycatcher*). However, where an alternative, widely accepted common name exists, that name should be used (for example Verreaux's Eagle for [African] Black Eagle), especially where that results in a shorter name (for example Yellow-bellied Greenbul rather than African Yellow-bellied Bulbul).

- Similarly, where a common name is used for a particular species that is also the generic common name for several other species, suitable descriptors should be added. For example, the name Curlew is widely used for *Numenius arquata*, but there are several other species of curlew. *N. arquata* is thus better named *Eurasian Curlew*. The main change this would have in southern Africa would be adopting Black-throated Wattle-eye (the name used throughout the rest of Africa) for the Wattle-eyed Flycatcher.

These changes are fairly straightforward, and many have already been instituted in recent editions of the *Sasol* field guide. Some of the 'new' names in *Sasol* could be simplified, however, by adopting alternative names used elsewhere.

The question of multiple common names for the same species is especially tricky. Quite a large number of

southern African birds have different common names in the rest of Africa, and it is the latter which tend to be internationally accepted. Ultimately it will be beneficial to southern African birders to adopt these names as it will facilitate communication of information and ideas among birders, standardize the names used in bird books, and thereby simplify birding throughout Africa. At this stage we propose that both the old southern African and the more widely used 'international' common names be used

in the new *Roberts'* to ease the passage to the eventual switch to a single list of English bird names.

We welcome your comments on these proposals. Please write to: *Roberts'* Project Manager, Percy FitzPatrick Institute, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701; fax (021) 650-3295 or e-mail: roberts@botzoo.uct.ac.za

Please do not write to *Africa - Birds & Birding!* A full list of suggested English names will be posted on the Fitz website. □

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