



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

November 17th, 2023

A Bird of Any Other Name Would Sound as Sweet

Across the board, America has been wrestling with the names of well-known organizations and places like the “Cleveland Indians” and the “Washington Redskins,” and many have opted to change their names in order to show sensitivity to groups of people who were previously marginalized. While there are still thousands of sites in the US that contain racist or pejorative words, the US Government proposed changing 660 place names last year, as they contained a derogatory name for a Native woman. In the animal world, we are doing the same by looking at the names of species and evaluating if they are the best possible names for that animal.

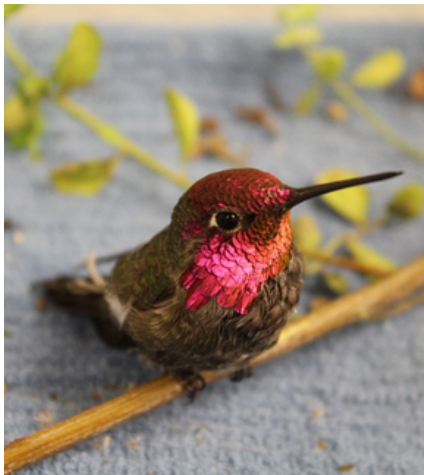
As new species of birds were “discovered” by European settlers, they were originally named for either their physical appearance, who found them, in honor of someone, or where they were located. In recent years, this practice has been questioned as their names have been, at times, linked to problematic historical figures.

Recently, the American Ornithological Society (AOS) announced that they will be renaming 70-80 bird species in the US and Canada. Scientists have been working to find names that reflect the species physical characteristics rather than relying on someone’s proper name. Some of these birds were originally named in the 1800’s at conventions with exclusionary membership policies. As the names were created during a time of racism and prejudice, the AOS wants to move away from any names with negative connotations.

The AOS began developing this project in 2021 after a number of nationally publicized cases such as the death of George Floyd and the Central Park incident involving birder Christian Cooper brought attention



Adult Cooper's Hawk in aviary.



Adult Male Anna's Hummingbird.

to movements fighting against racism and injustice. Around this time, a group called “Bird Names for Birds” wrote to the leadership of AOS to demand name changes for any species associated with racism and slavery. It is their belief that titles that are associated with some species’ names perpetuate colonialism and racism.

The Cooper’s Hawk and Anna’s hummingbird are two such species that we regularly see here at California Wildlife Center and are both listed to have their names changed. While not all birds have a name connected to a negative figure such as these two species, it galvanized the movement to change any name that is a proper noun to one that is for a physical attribute for the bird.



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After two years of discussion, the AOS decided to take action. Their goal is to make birding and ornithology as welcoming and inviting to as broad a group of people as possible. Birds who were named for early collectors who thought that Native people were inferior and robbed their graves to collect skulls, do not encourage a diverse group of people in the field.

The renaming will begin in 2024, and while the group initiating the change understands this will not end racism, it is a step in a positive direction. California Wildlife Center supports focusing on each birds' unique traits that distinguish them while providing visual reference. We look forward to moving forward together!