***A short account of the eponymous bird names issue as considered within Birdlife Australia.***

* Geoffrey Dabb (draft 10 Dec 2023)

Possible revision of eponymous names had been a matter discussed, inconclusively, over several years. However, during that period the committee recommending bird names (for convenience ‘the Names Committee’) was required expressly to take a conservative approach with respect to existing names. Some of the existing names had been settled in the 1980s by a divisive process involving formal voting. A particular issue raised from time to time was possible change to ‘Major Mitchell’s Cockatoo’ which bore the name of an explorer, Thomas Mitchell (1792-1855), accused of harsh treatment of indigenous people on one of his expeditions.

In 1978, recommendations to RAOU favoured retention of eponymous names. ‘They are distinctive and no more useless, inappropriate or lacking in definition than such names as Song Thrush and Superb Lyrebird.’

However, during 2021, the possibility of moving away from eponymous names and modifying the conservative policy occupied the attention of the Research and Conservation Committee (RACC), a body within Birdlife Australia to which the Names Committee reported. This led to creation of a working group to develop criteria for revision of eponymous names. The working group reported in October 2022, with the recommendations –

* As a principle, Birdlife Australia should transition away from eponymous names for Australian birds. This avoids the dilemma of Birdlife Australia having to make decisions about the character or worthiness of people after which birds are named.
* All eponymous names for species with their main breeding area in Australia should eventually be replaced.

Those proposals were not supported by the Names Committee which favoured a more selective approach. The subsequent discussion involved the chief executive and the board of the organization. The decision made in October of this year called for a more gradual approach. The Names Committee, with its terms of reference modified, would ‘review culturally insensitive, honorific and eponymous names, as requested by RACC, based on guidelines approved by the … Board …’.

The process would begin with a pilot review that would address a small number of selected names. It would involve wide consultation in order to arrive at appropriate alternative names. It is likely that the limitation will be observed that only birds with their ‘main breeding area in Australia’ will be considered.

The proposed revision does not apply to ‘geographical eponyms’, that is names that refer to a place or region that contains a personal name. (Examples are ‘Lord Howe Woodhen’ and ‘Kimberley Flycatcher’.)

The decision of Birdlife Australia should be seen against current practice among global and regional checklists with respect to bird names. Unlike the state of affairs 40 years ago, when there was something like an ‘official name’ for each Australian bird species, people today can choose a source for the names they use, or even follow several sources. Many observers follow the ‘IOC’ global list. Many others use ‘eBird’, a recording system managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which offers a choice of English names including ‘English (Australia)’. For official use Australian government agencies, including the Australian Faunal Directory, tend to pick and choose, sometimes giving multiple English names. Birdlife Australia’s revised list is intended for Birdlife Australia purposes.

In considering the number of names that might be affected, it might be noted that Birdlife Australia, alone among organisations that offer national or regional lists, has assigned English names to subspecies. Typically, these consist of a regional description added to the species name, for example ‘Central Queensland Coast Lewin’s Honeyeater’. In such cases the subspecies name will change with the species name. Including subspecies in the current project adds significantly to the number of affected names.

***English names of Australian bird species where the name refers to a person***

***(1) Bird species named for a person (see also (3) below)***

Zoe’s Imperial-Pigeon\*\*

Horsfield’s Bronze-Cuckoo

Lewin’s Rail\*\*

Baillon’s Crake\*\*

Schrenck’s Bittern\*\*

Abbott’s Booby

Gurney’s Eagle\*\*

Baudin’s Black-Cockatoo

Carnaby’s Black-Cockatoo

Major Mitchell’s Cockatoo

Bourke’s Parrot

Coxen’s Fig-Parrot

Regent Parrot

Princess Parrot

Australian King-Parrot

Albert’s Lyrebird

Regent Bowerbird

Gilbert’s Honeyeater

Macleay’s Honeyeater

Lewin’s Honeyeater

Regent Honeyeater

Hall’s Babbler

Gilbert’s Whistler

Bower’s Shrike-thrush

Horsfield’s Bushlark\*\*

Pallas’s Grasshopper-Warbler\*\*

Middendorff’s Grasshopper-Warbler\*\*

Gouldian Finch

\*\* main or substantial population occurs outside Australia

***(2) Bird species named for a geographic area or place named for a person***

King Island Emu

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon

Lord Howe Woodhen

Tasmanian Native-hen

Tasmanian Boobook

Tasman Boobook

Norfolk Island Kaka

Eyrean Grasswren

Kimberley Honeyeater

Atherton Scrubwren

Tasmanian Scrubwren

Tasmanian Thornbill

Torresian Crow

Norfolk Island Robin

Kimberley Flycatcher

Tasman Starling

Bassian Thrush

Isabelline Wheatear (a curiosity, named for a colour named for person)

***(3) Widespread or oceanic seabirds, or migratory species, named for a person***

Wilson’s Storm-Petrel

Matsudaira’s Storm-Petrel

Leach’s Storm-Petrel

Swinhoe’s Storm-Petrel

Tristram’s Storm-Petrel

Buller’s Albatross

Salvin’s Albatross

Salvin’s Prion

Gould’s Petrel

Stejneger’s Petrel

Cook’s Petrel

Pycroft’s Petrel

Barau’s Petrel

Buller’s Shearwater

Cory’s Shearwater

Hutton’s Shearwater

Newell’s Shearwater

Heinroth’s Shearwater

Bulwer’s Petrel

Jouanin’s Petrel

Temminck’s Stint

Baird’s Sandpiper

Latham’s Snipe

Swinhoe’s Snipe

Wilson’s Phalarope

Nordmann’s Greenshank

Sabine’s Gull

Franklin’s Gull

Saunders’s Tern

***(4) Widespread or oceanic seabirds, or migratory species, named for a geographic area or place named for a person***

Adelie Penguin

Magellanic Penguin

Tristan Albatross

Campbell Albatross

Chatham Albatross

Kerguelen Petrel

Kermadec Petrel

Juan Fernandez Petrel

South Georgia Diving-Petrel

Hudsonian Godwit

***(5) Species names of uncertain origin***

King Quail

Herald Petrel