

Ornithological society to rename dozens of birds—and stop naming them after people

November 2 2023, by Christina Larson



This photo provided by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service shows a Wilson's Snipe bird at the Kern National Wildlife Refuge in California. The American Ornithological Society announced Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2023, that birds in North America will no longer be named after people. In 2024, it will begin to rename around 80 species found in the U.S. and Canada. Birds that will be renamed include those currently called Wilson's warbler and Wilson's snipe, both named after the 19th century naturalist Alexander Wilson. Credit: USFWS via AP

Birds in North America will no longer be named after people, the American Ornithological Society [announced Wednesday](#).

Next year, the organization will begin to rename around 80 species found in the U.S. and Canada.

"There is power in a name, and some English bird names have associations with the past that continue to be exclusionary and harmful today," the organization's president, Colleen Handel, said in a statement. "Everyone who loves and cares about birds should be able to enjoy and study them freely."

Rather than review each bird named after a person individually, all such birds will be renamed, the organization announced.

Birds that will be renamed include those currently called Wilson's warbler and Wilson's snipe, both named after the 19th century naturalist Alexander Wilson. Audubon's shearwater, a seabird named for John James Audubon, also will get a new name.

In 2020, the organization renamed a bird once referring to a Confederate Army general, John P. McCown, as the thick-billed longspur.

"I'm really happy and excited about the announcement," said Emily Williams, an ornithologist at Georgetown University who was not involved in the decision.



This photo provided by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service shows a Wilson's warbler bird in Alaska. The American Ornithological Society announced Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2023, that birds in North America will no longer be named after people. In 2024, it will begin to rename around 80 species found in the U.S. and Canada. Birds that will be renamed include those currently called Wilson's warbler and Wilson's snipe, both named after the 19th century naturalist Alexander Wilson. Credit: USFWS via AP

She said heated discussions over bird names have been happening within birdwatching communities for the past several years.

"Naming birds based on habitat or appearance is one of the least problematic approaches," she said.

Earlier this year, the National Audubon Society [announced](#) that it would retain its name, even as critics and some voices within the organization have argued that it should dump the association with a man, John James Audubon, whose family owned slaves.

"The name has come to represent so much more than the work of one person," Susan Bell, chair of the National Audubon Society's Board of Directors, told [Audubon magazine](#) in March, adding, "We must reckon with the racist legacy of John James Audubon."

A 2020 encounter in New York's Central Park served as a public wake-up call about the discrimination that Black people sometimes face when trying to enjoy the outdoors.

Christian Cooper, a Black birdwatcher, was looking for birds when he asked a [white woman](#), Amy Cooper, to follow local rules and leash her dog. Cooper called 911 and was later charged with filing a false police report, though the charges were later dropped.

Soon after, a collective of birdwatchers organized the first [Black Birders Week](#) to increase the visibility of Black nature lovers and scientists.

And a group called [Bird Names for Birds](#) sent a petition to the ornithological society urging it to "outline a plan to change harmful common names" of [birds](#).

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Citation: Ornithological society to rename dozens of birds—and stop naming them after people (2023, November 2) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-ornithological-society-rename-dozens-birdsand.html>

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