

FAQ About Changing Eponymous English Bird Names (EEBNs)

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1. What bird species does AOS have jurisdiction over their English names? AOS has been responsible for designating the English names of all bird species that occur in the Western Hemisphere. The AOS North American Classification Committee (NACC) and the South American Classification Committee (SACC) have made decisions on bird names since 1886 and 1999, respectively.

2. Who made the decision to remove all EEBNs? In 2021 the AOS Council appointed an Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee to serve in an advisory role. Its charge was to: (1) gather information about how AOS members, other ornithologists, and the broader birding public feel about eponymous English bird names through a professionally administered survey¹; and (2) make recommendations for a process that will allow the AOS to change harmful and exclusionary English bird names for species within its purview². Instead of following its charge, the Ad Hoc Committee claimed it was too difficult to devise a process and recommended elimination of all 152 eponymous English names on the NACC list and 111 on the SACC checklist. AOS Council voted to approve this recommendation on 7 August 2023. Council members were sworn to secrecy until the decision was announced on 1 November 2023.

3. Is it intractable to take a case-by-case approach to determine which EEBNs should be changed? It depends on who you ask. The Ad Hoc Committee thought so. However, the NACC showed it was possible when they changed McCown's Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*) to Thick-billed Longspur in fall 2020 in response to social justice concerns about McCown's service as a Confederate general in the Civil War. Moreover, most universities have developed principles for naming and renaming buildings. Municipalities have done the same for streets, parks and public spaces, as has the US Dept. of Interior for features with derogatory names. Compiling and adapting the principles used and the criteria established by other organizations should have been a key part of the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee's efforts and report. We are unaware of any other organization that has decided to remove all eponymous names for other taxa or for buildings, streets, etc.

4. Did the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee consult with the North American and South American Classification Committees about making name changes? Not in a meaningful way. In June 2023, NACC and SACC were given two weeks to respond to the draft report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the condition that its contents and recommendations be kept secret. There were no joint meetings of the committees and no attempt was made to find consensus. NACC and SACC were not given a chance to respond to the final report.

5. Are the North American and South American Classification Committees in favor of changing all EEBNs? No. NACC voted 12-0 and SACC voted 9-1 against the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee's recommendation to do away with all eponymous names, instead

recommending name changes on a case-by-case basis. NACC and SACC provided detailed comments on why doing away with all eponymous names was not a wise decision.

6. Did the AOS poll its members about changing EEBNs? No, even though it was part of the charge to the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee. The Committee claimed it would not be able to administer and analyze a poll. But even a very targeted poll would have elucidated the membership's attitude toward changing all EEBNs, changing them on a case-by-case basis, or whether any eponymous name should be changed. A survey would have indicated how important this issue is to AOS members relative to other issues facing birds and the AOS today. Polling its members for their perspectives was key to informing AOS leaders making the difficult decisions to merge their predecessor societies and to change the names of its journals. AOS members expect to have their voices heard by their elected leaders when controversial decisions are being made.

7. But wasn't there a public event about English bird names that AOS held? On 16 April 2021 the AOS held an online "Community Congress on English Bird Names" that was organized by the Diversity & Inclusion Committee. This was not a forum on whether eponymous names should be changed (presenters were all in favor of name changes). It focused discussion on the feasibility of changing names primarily from the perspectives of those involved in bird monitoring programs and authors of field guides. The leaders of NACC and SACC did not participate in this event and the individuals they suggested as panelists were not selected. The Community Congress was held before AOS had established the Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee. Two information sessions ("Community Forums") with AOS officers were held after announcing the elimination of eponymous names (7, 8 Nov. 2023).

8. Did AOS consult with other Western Hemisphere ornithological societies about changing EEBNs? No. The AOS made a unilateral decision despite the fact that geographic ranges for only 8 of the 263 species with eponymous English names fall entirely within the US and Canada.

9. Will other organizations follow the lead of AOS and eliminate all eponymous bird names? This seems unlikely. The International Ornithologists' Union (IOU), which maintains a list of English names for all birds of the world, have indicated they are not in favor of removing eponyms. The South American Classification Committee is now affiliated with the Working Group on Avian Checklists of the IOU and will consider name changes on a case-by-case basis.

10. What are the repercussions of the decision to do away with all eponymous English bird names? Frustrated AOS members have publicly resigned from the society including award winners and past editors of its journals. Other members have publicly stated they will no longer attend meetings, resigned from committees, and withdrawn manuscripts from AOS journals. The South American Classification Committee has seceded from AOS and is now affiliated with the International Ornithologists' Union. [Public opinion](#) appears to be decidedly against doing away with all eponymous bird names. An online [petition](#) to enact a case-by-case method to remove offensive names has been signed by over 6200 individuals and is growing.

11. Why is stability important for English bird names? Stability of English bird names is very important for communication among scientists and the general public. Standardization and stability of English names was a major mission of AOS and the NACC since its founding in 1886. Some changes to English names are inevitable due to changes in species limits and efforts to standardize English names world-wide. Since 1998, an average of 1 English bird name has been changed per year by the NACC.

12. How long will it take and how much money will it cost to change all of the EEBNs?

We don't know yet, but one estimate from AOS leadership suggested it may require 10 years and \$1 million dollars just to change the names of North American birds. A pilot project to develop a process for 5-10 species has been funded for ~\$130,000, which equates to \$46 per AOS member. Moreover, there will be costs to governmental and other organizations for updating interpretive signs, educational materials, websites, and databases. Professional bird tour guides throughout the Western Hemisphere will need to purchase new bird guides or apps, and learn new common names to communicate with their customers. The new names will also cause confusion for the public.

13. Does AOS leadership know about the Resolution calling for a moratorium on changing all EEBNs? Yes. The Resolution was discussed multiple times with AOS President Handel and President-Elect Morris as it was being drafted and as it has progressed through various stages of accruing signers.

14. Is the Resolution and other pushback against the decision to rid English Bird names of eponyms a result of racists and others opposed to being inclusive in ornithology?

Absolutely not. We recognize that as messengers we will be subject to various labels by individuals who don't want to hear our message. Moreover, nearly everyone who signed the Resolution expressed their interest in changing harmful EEBNs and in retaining inoffensive eponyms that preserve the history of ornithology and the AOS.

15. Won't this Resolution be divisive and cause further strife? Actually, just the opposite. Harmful English bird names should be changed, and it sends a stronger message that the AOS is committed to its goal of increasing diversity and inclusiveness if name changes are restricted to those people, rather than replacing all eponymous English names. We believe there is an opportunity to mobilize and unite AOS members and birders in the Western Hemisphere by implementing a case-by-case approach to eliminate harmful English bird names. While sadly this initial opportunity was lost, AOS can modify its decision and move forward where there is a near consensus to eliminate harmful bird names.

Footnotes:

¹ AOS Council meeting minutes: 2 June 2021, 27 June 2022, 6 August 2021.

² Ad Hoc English Bird Names Committee Recommendations for Council of the American Ornithological Society (AOS). ([link](#))