NAMING OF BIRDS AS PART OF THE INTELLECTUAL CULTURE OF INDIANS AT OLD CROW, YUKON TERRITORY

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It is easy for people unfamiliar with living conditions in the Arctic to believe that special physical abilities are necessary for the continued existence of arctic peoples. It is harder to recognize that intellectual competence also is required for the special cultural adaptation of a small community to living independently under arctic conditions. Modern science and technology rely so much on the printed word that it is difficult for us to communicate accurately with people whose only records of knowledge consist of the remembered meaning of spoken words. Our attempt to communicate with Indians is hindered by the necessity of using our language, established for quite other circumstances than theirs, with concepts and vocabulary limited by our rudimentary familiarity with the objects and conditions surrounding the people who live in the arctic villages.

When making preparations for the U. S. Public Health Service Alaska-Yukon Expedition to Old Crow, Y. T., I had hoped to receive assistance from the resident Indians in studying the life of their country. When we began work, at first a few individuals and soon most members of the community showed their interest in satisfying our curiosity about their life and environment. This sympathetic acceptance of our purpose favoured mutual understanding so that I was able to compare the recognition and naming of birds by the resident Indians with the list of birds of that area prepared by our scientific methods. One of the older Indian residents at Old Crow recognized and named in his own Kutchin language every species shown to him by the collectors and unmistakably described a few that we did not find. This informant, Joe Kay, obtained for us a number of especially valuable specimens. He apparently knew when and where to look for each migratory species and often was the first to report a new arrival. For example, he collected a violet-green swallow for us 3 weeks before we saw one ourselves. He distinguished it from the tree swallows, which were then common near the village, and said that he knew it as the "mountain swallow" of his earlier experiences.

In two arctic communities of Alaskan Eskimo I have found recognition of and names for most of the birds that I could distinguish there by

scientific study (Irving, 1953, 1958). At Old Crow it became apparent that some of the older residents were equally sure of their recognition of the birds of their area. Illustrations, brief verbal descriptions of the appearance, attitude, action, habit, and habitat of a species brought from Joe Kay either a prompt denial of having seen the bird, or elicited complementary descriptions pertinent to the locality and season. This sort of knowledge of nature can be a most valuable aid to the scientist, for it provides him with observations made during a lifetime and in seasons and weather when most scientists remain indoors.

I obtained from Joe Kay names for all the birds that we found, except the killdeer, which was recorded only from sight, Baird's sandpiper, savannah sparrow, and Lincoln's sparrow, the specimens of which had been packed before I could ask him their names. I did not inquire about these birds, because I felt that my descriptions would not give Joe Kay a fair or reliable basis for their recognition. In addition to the species that we found he named and clearly described seven species that we did not find (Table 1).

Kay wrote the Indian names in English letters according to the scheme of writing devised by Archdeacon MacDonald for recording Anglican services for the Kutchin people. He is a man of uncommon intelligence and has long been accustomed to this form of writing, but I can neither judge its accuracy, nor correctly repeat the sounds, and I do not know the construction of the language. Joe Kay had been the elected chief of his village for 14 years (about 1920 to 1934). He is commonly called Big Joe and is often referred to as The Big Fellow, for he is renowned for his former great strength and good leadership, and for his present wisdom. I am giving the names as he wrote them, for it would be presumption for me to criticize his usage, but I must apologize for possible errors in recording.

I have been able to compare the Kutchin names for 91 species of birds at Old Crow with Eskimo names for the same species used by the people at Anaktuvuk and Kobuk, Alaska (Irving, 1958). There is a resemblance only between the Kutchin and Eskimo names for old-squaw and great grey owl. From Alaska to Greenland the Eskimo names for birds are much alike. This resemblance between names from widely separated communities demonstrates the stability of this naming process in the intellectual culture of the Eskimo people. I have no evidence for the stability of the Indian names in various regions, but the accuracy and completeness of their ability suggests that among the Old Crow Indians the naming of birds is also the result of an anciently perfected system of intellectual culture.

Arctic Indians and Eskimo have long been close neighbours. Their historians, like ours, seem to prefer to dwell upon the perversion of man's social interests by his desire for conflict rather than the relation of the stories of useful exchanges between neighbouring people, and so it is only incidentally that we learn about the implements and crafts that have been exchanged between Eskimo and Indians. Some of their ways of hunting,
fishing, and travelling are so much alike as to suggest that they recognized the practical value of each other's ways and were not averse to adopting parts of their material cultures that would adapt them better to their environment. The resemblance between two out of 91 names for birds may be accidental if it represents a conspicuous sound or appearance. Whether or not this resemblance represents an exchange of views on natural history between Eskimo and Indians, it shows how insignificant has been the exchange of non-adaptive intellectual culture. That Indian and Eskimo neighbours have a perfect and complete, but entirely different list of names for birds shows how well insulated from external influence such naming processes in intellectual culture can remain.

To those like myself, who are not familiar with unwritten languages, it is surprising to learn that a complete category of natural objects, e.g., birds, can be accurately named without the aid of a record in book or museum. The transmission of the names of objects through memory appears to be more conservative than their preservation in writing or the taxonomy of science, for the latter two processes are provisional, whereas memorized naming is definite. Upon reflection it is evident that the use of names in the transmission of knowledge by speech must be completely conservative or the result would be utter confusion.

We may also wonder what purpose was served for the old-time Indian in naming every species of bird. Only a few kinds of ducks and ptarmigan were important as food, although any sizeable bird that could be obtained was eaten, especially during times of emergency, which were not infrequent among people who had scant means of transport and storage. Birds were also used to substitute an easily acquired food for a scarce one. But in a practical way birds belong to one of the least important classes of animals. Since it is not a practical necessity, this meticulous cultivation of knowledge that is shown in the complete naming of the avifauna represents an exercise satisfying the desire of man for intellectual activity. After we began to receive explicit information about birds from the people at Old Crow, we found that their accounts were interwoven with tales of other events and experiences at the localities and times when the birds were observed. As I became better acquainted with the people, their subjective appreciation of form, colour, action, and song was often added to the signs of recognition. Later it became clear that many birds were the principal figures in delightful and often intricate stories.

These stories show that birds were one of the important natural categories used in social conversations. To make fanciful stories significant for observant people the characters and objects must possess the reality of accurate distinction by name. In dramatic representation the resemblance of reality is an essential basis for illusion and moralizing and the characters executing fanciful performances are only impressive when they have correct natural attributes.

Since distinction and naming of birds are used for social purposes, the system of naming is part of the knowledge of the community rather
than that of the individual. Much of the knowledge of the community is an inheritance that is gained by the individual through studies under the guidance of older people. In Joe Kay's case, he learned the names of birds and how to study them as part of his education while a boy. Not all the people of his age, at the time in question about 75, know birds well.

Like much knowledge in any society natural history among Indians must have been transmitted from generation to generation through the minds of a small number of individuals. This appears to us an uncertain way of preserving knowledge, for we do not trust our memories. We confidently assemble our common knowledge in libraries and museums, forgetting that history tells us of their eventual destruction by wear and tear or catastrophe and that archaeology has to show only a few fragments from which we must deduce even the commonest knowledge possessed by ancient man. We have scarcely any recollection of the stability of the stream of knowledge, which used to be transmitted verbally, and which ran intact through the minds of many successive generations, even though the channel was formed by only a few individuals.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Birds of Old Crow and their Indian names*</th>
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<tr>
<td>Common loon, Gavia immer</td>
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<td>Arctic (Pacific) loon, G. arctica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red-necked (Holboell's) grebe, Podiceps grisegena</td>
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<td>Horned grebe, P. auritus</td>
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<td>Whistling swan, Olor columbianus</td>
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<td>Canada goose, Branta canadensis</td>
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<td>Black brant, B. nigricans</td>
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<td>White-fronted goose, Anser albifrons</td>
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<td>Snow goose, Chen hyperborea</td>
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<td>Mallard, Anas platyrhynchos</td>
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<td>Pintail, A. acuta</td>
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<td>Green-winged teal, A. carolinensis</td>
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<td>†Shoveller, Spatula clypeata</td>
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<td>American widgeon (Baldpate), Mareca americana</td>
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<td>Greater scaup, Aythy a marila</td>
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<td>Lesser scaup, A. affinis</td>
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* The common and scientific names are those of the fifth edition of the A.O.U. Check-List, 1957. Common names that have been in general use are added in ( ).
† Indian names and descriptions obtained, but no specimens seen.
NAMING OF BIRDS BY INDIANS AT OLD CROW

Common (American) golden-eye, *Bucephala clangula*
Barrow's golden-eye, *B. islandica*
Old-squaw, *Clangula hyemalis*
Harlequin duck, *Histrionicus histrionicus*
White-winged scoter, *Melanitta deglandi*
Surf scoter, *M. perspicillata*
Red-breasted merganser, *Mergus serrator*
Goshawk, *Accipiter gentilis*
Sharp-shinned hawk, *A. striatus*
(American) Rough-legged hawk, *Buteo lagopus*
Golden eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*
Bald eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
Marsh hawk, *Circus cyaneus*
Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*
†Gyr falcon, *Falco rusticolus*
Peregrine falcon, *F. peregrinus*
Pigeon hawk, *F. columbarius*
†Spruce grouse, *Canachites canadensis*
†Ruffed grouse, *Bonasa umbellus*
Willow ptarmigan, *Lagopus lagopus*
Rock ptarmigan, *L. mutus*
Sandhill (Little brown) crane, *Grus canadensis*
Semipalmated plover, *Charadrius semipalmatus*
Killdeer, *Ch. vociferus*
Common (Wilson's) snipe, *Capella gallinago*
Whimbrel (Hudsonian curlew), *Numenius phaeopus*
Spotted sandpiper, *Actitis macularia*
Solitary sandpiper, *Tringa solitaria*
Lesser yellow-legs, *Totanus flavipes*
Pectoral sandpiper, *Erolia melanotos*
Baird's sandpiper, *E. bairdii*
Least sandpiper, *E. minutilla*
Semipalmated sandpiper, *Ereunetes pusillus*
Northern phalarope, *Lobipes lobatus*
Parasitic jaeger, *Stercorarius parasiticus*
Long-tailed jaeger, *St. longicaudus*
Glaucous gull, *Larus hyperboreus*
Herring gull, *L. argentatus*
Mew (Short-billed) gull, *L. canus*
Bonaparte's gull, *L. philadelphia*
Arctic tern, *Sterna paradisaea*
Great horned owl, *Bubo virginianus*
†Snowy owl, *Nyctea scandiaca*
Hawk-owl, *Surnia ulula*
Great grey owl, *Strix nebulosa*
†Boreal (Richardson's) owl, *Aegolius funereus*
Flicker, *Colaptes sp.*
Ladder-backed woodpecker, *Dendrocopos scalaris*
Say's phoebe, *Sayornis saya*
Traill's (Alder) flycatcher, *Empidonax traillii*
Olive-sided flycatcher, *Nuttallornis borealis*
Horned lark, *Eremophila alpestris*
Violet-green swallow, *Tachycineta thalassina*

Tovi
Tesitit kyi
Ahaluk
Tsi tut kwiluk
Nya
Tetre la
Tirah
Tzi choh
Chul rut tait
Chut khui chun tsik
Chittese
Chizin
Tzechoo
Thuk
Kwi tsi chi
Chinechun
Chin tettroo
Tui
Chut tul
Taka
Tako
Chya
Shishenetyei

Jazyah
Tetnjo
Traruk
Tue
Tachoh
Teggetesel

Tagatsil
Teggetesel ve
Trevug
Tizel kug
Dza
Tyittet kkya
Tetyet kkya
Vyou
Chit tryo
Kkya notetutgga
Veezay
Riseitivay
Tchichitoo
Nastok
Nastotesul
Chut lut
Tutchun tsya
Ni kut itsi
Sit tri gichi zzeh
Tzivi
Katu
Tha shait sove

—Sight record or specimens obtained, but no Indian name.
Tree swallow, *Iridoprocne bicolor*  
Bank swallow, *Riparia riparia*  
Cliff swallow, *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*  
Grey (Canada) jay, *Perisoreus canadensis*  
Common raven, *Corvus corax*  
Boreal (Hudsonian) chickadee, *Parus hudsonicus*  
†Dipper, *Cinclus mexicanus*  
Robin, *Turdus migratorius*  
Varied thrush, *Ixoreus naevius*  
Swainson’s (Russet-backed) thrush, *Hylocichla ustulata*  
Grey-cheeked thrush, *H. minimax*  
Wheatear, *Oenanthe oenanthe*  
Ruby-crowned kinglet, *Regulus calendula*  
Water (American) pipit, *Anthus spinoletta*  
Bohemian waxwing, *Bombycilla garrula*  
Northern shrike, *Lanius excubitor*  
Orange-crowned warbler, *Vermivora celata*  
Yellow warbler, *Dendroica petechia*  
Myrtle warbler, *D. coronata*  
Blackpoll warbler, *D. striata*  
Northern (Grinnell’s) water-thrush, *Seiurus noveboracensis*  
Wilson’s (Pileolated) warbler, *Wilsonia pusilla*  
Rusty blackbird, *Euphagus carolinus*  
Pine grosbeak, *Pinicola enucleator*  
Redpoll, *Acanthis sp.*  
White-winged crossbill, *Loxia leucoptera*  
Savannah sparrow, *Passerculus sandwichensis*  
Slate-colored junco, *Junco hyemalis*  
Tree sparrow, *Spizella arborea*  
(Gambel’s) White-crowned sparrow, *Zonotrichia leucophrys*  
Fox sparrow, *Passerella iliaca*  
Lincoln’s sparrow, *Melospiza lincolni*  
Lapland (Alaska) longspur, *Calcarius lapponicus*  
Snow-bunting, *Plectrophenax nivalis*  

Total number 103 99

References