

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

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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.

These studies were aided by a contract with the Office of Naval Research, Department of the Navy, and the Arctic Institute of North America. Reproduction in whole or in part is permitted for any purpose of the United States Government.

Aid was also received through a grant from the Explorers Club.

I gratefully acknowledge the help of Constables P. A. Robin and Ronald Gordon, R.C.M.P., in obtaining the collaboration of the people of Old Crow.

Table 1. Birds of Old Crow and their Indian names*.

Common loon, <i>Gavia immer</i>	Ttretetere
Arctic (Pacific) loon, <i>G. arctica</i>	Thulvit
Red-necked (Holboell's) grebe, <i>Podiceps grisegena</i>	Tekkui
Horned grebe, <i>P. auritus</i>	Notsik
Whistling swan, <i>Olor columbianus</i>	Tarui
Canada goose, <i>Branta canadensis</i>	Kyha
Black brant, <i>B. nigricans</i>	Ttsun tratesil
White-fronted goose, <i>Anser albifrons</i>	Techyo
Snow goose, <i>Chen hyperborea</i>	Kookeh
Mallard, <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Natakcho
Pintail, <i>A. acuta</i>	Chinchityo & Nakostiky
Green-winged teal, <i>A. carolinensis</i>	Tarui kahka
†Shoveller, <i>Spatula clypeata</i>	Tetrik
American widgeon (Baldpate), <i>Mareca americana</i>	Kaloree
Greater scaup, <i>Aythya marila</i>	Tani cho
Lesser scaup, <i>A. affinis</i>	Nityitin

* 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.

Common (American) golden-eye, <i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Tovi
Barrow's golden-eye, <i>B. islandica</i>	Tesitit kyi
Old-squaw, <i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	Ahaluk
Harlequin duck, <i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	Tsi tut kwiluk
White-winged scoter, <i>Melanitta deglandi</i>	Nya
Surf scoter, <i>M. perspicillata</i>	Tetre la
Red-breasted merganser, <i>Mergus serrator</i>	Ttrah
Goshawk, <i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	Tzi choh
Sharp-shinned hawk, <i>A. striatus</i>	Chul rut tsit
(American) Rough-legged hawk, <i>Buteo lagopus</i>	Chut khui chun tsik
Golden eagle, <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Chittese
Bald eagle, <i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	Chizin
Marsh hawk, <i>Circus cyaneus</i>	Tzecho
Osprey, <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Thuk
†Gyr Falcon, <i>Falco rusticolus</i>	Kwi tsi chi
Peregrine falcon, <i>F. peregrinus</i>	Chinechun
Pigeon hawk, <i>F. columbarius</i>	Chin tettroo
†Spruce grouse, <i>Canachites canadensis</i>	Tui
†Ruffed grouse, <i>Bonasa umbellus</i>	Chut tul
Willow ptarmigan, <i>Lagopus lagopus</i>	Taka
Rock ptarmigan, <i>L. mutus</i>	Tako
Sandhill (Little brown) crane, <i>Grus canadensis</i>	Chya
Semipalmated plover, <i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	Shishenetyei
Killdeer, <i>Ch. vociferus</i>	—
Common (Wilson's) snipe, <i>Capella gallinago</i>	Jazyah
Whimbrel (Hudsonian curlew), <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Tetajyo
Spotted sandpiper, <i>Actitis macularia</i>	Traruk
Solitary sandpiper, <i>Tringa solitaria</i>	Tue
Lesser yellow-legs, <i>Totanus flavipes</i>	Tachoh
Pectoral sandpiper, <i>Erolia melanotos</i>	Teggetesel
Baird's sandpiper, <i>E. bairdii</i>	—
Least sandpiper, <i>E. minutilla</i>	Tagatsil
Semipalmated sandpiper, <i>Ereunetes pusillus</i>	Teggetsel ve
Northern phalarope, <i>Lobipes lobatus</i>	Trevug
Parasitic jaeger, <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	Tzel kug
Long-tailed jaeger, <i>St. longicaudus</i>	Dza
Glaucous gull, <i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	Tyittet kkya
Herring gull, <i>L. argentatus</i>	Tetyet kkya
Mew (Short-billed) gull, <i>L. canus</i>	Vyou
Bonaparte's gull, <i>L. philadelphia</i>	Chit tryo
Arctic tern, <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	Kkya notetutgga
Great horned owl, <i>Bubo virginianus</i>	Veezay
†Snowy owl, <i>Nyctea scandiaca</i>	Riseitivyay
Hawk-owl, <i>Surnia ulula</i>	Tchichitoo
Great grey owl, <i>Strix nebulosa</i>	Nastok
†Boreal (Richardson's) owl, <i>Aegolius funereus</i>	Nastotesul
Flicker, <i>Colaptes</i> sp.	Chut lut
Ladder-backed woodpecker, <i>Dendrocopos scalaris</i>	Tutchun tsya
Say's phoebe, <i>Sayornis saya</i>	Ni kut itsi
Traill's (Alder) flycatcher, <i>Empidonax traillii</i>	Sit tri gichi zzeh
Olive-sided flycatcher, <i>Nuttallornis borealis</i>	Tzivi
Horned lark, <i>Eremophila alpestris</i>	Katu
Violet-green swallow, <i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>	Ttha shait sove

—Sight record or specimens obtained, but no Indian name.

Tree swallow, <i>Iridoprocne bicolor</i>	Sha so ve
Bank swallow, <i>Riparia riparia</i>	Shai tso ve
Cliff swallow, <i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>	Shatsso
Grey (Canada) jay, <i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>	Titimkotam
Common raven, <i>Corvus corax</i>	Tatoo
Boreal (Hudsonian) chickadee, <i>Parus hudsonicus</i>	Tchichika
†Dipper, <i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>	Tsi rzui
Robin, <i>Turdus migratorius</i>	Syo
Varied thrush, <i>Ixoreus naevius</i>	Sya
Swainson's (Russet-backed) thrush, <i>Hyllocichla ustulata</i>	Tzi chi tlio
Grey-cheeked thrush, <i>H. minima</i>	Tsintzio
Wheatear, <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	Ttha tze
Ruby-crowned kinglet, <i>Regulus calendula</i>	Khut traluk
Water (American) pipit, <i>Anthus spinoletta</i>	Kwit kkyo zyo
Bohemian waxwing, <i>Bombycilla garrula</i>	Khut tsa luk
Northern shrike, <i>Lanius excubitor</i>	Tzi kwut go katshi lyi
Orange-crowned warbler, <i>Vermivora celata</i>	Tzi vit tich kwatlo
Yellow warbler, <i>Dendroica petechia</i>	Tsetso
Myrtle warbler, <i>D. coronata</i>	Kyekyszez
Blackpoll warbler, <i>D. striata</i>	Tzi vit sitik kwarzui
Northern (Grinnell's) water-thrush, <i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>	Chootzi
Wilson's (Pileolated) warbler, <i>Wilsonia pusilla</i>	Tsetso khekui
Rusty blackbird, <i>Euphagus carolinus</i>	Chilly cho
Pine grosbeak, <i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	Teevay
Redpoll, <i>Acanthis</i> sp.	Taloo
White-winged crossbill, <i>Loxia leucoptera</i>	Tizinkee
Savannah sparrow, <i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>	—
Slate-colored junco, <i>Junco hyemalis</i>	Tchikikeekeejay
Tree sparrow, <i>Spizella arborea</i>	Tchinkee
(Gambel's) White-crowned sparrow, <i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>	Natzik
Fox sparrow, <i>Passerella iliaca</i>	Tcheekeekek
Lincoln's sparrow, <i>Melospiza lincolni</i>	—
Lapland (Alaska) longspur, <i>Calcarius lapponicus</i>	Shinjee
Snow-bunting, <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	Kukuzu
Total number	103
	99

References

- Irving, L. 1953. The naming of birds by Nunamiut Eskimo. *Arctic* 6:35-43.
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