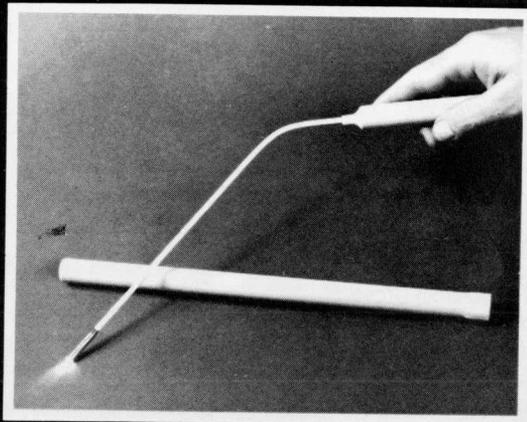


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random thoughts... on names and naming

by David D. May
Moab, Utah

Names are identifying labels, or "handles," that allow us to use a kind of verbal shorthand in talking or writing about things. All kinds of things, from door knobs to neighbors, have names that allow us to communicate about them more easily. Birds have names, too, both the common names that all of us use routinely and the "scientific" names that we use less frequently. Scientific names often are regarded as "fancy" or excessively technical. They frequently are a nearly unpronounceable combination of Latin or Greek terms rarely understood by any of us. They seem rigid, whereas common names are a lot more "user friendly" and a whole lot easier to say or spell.

The more technical names *are* more rigid, and therein lies their usefulness and purpose. The main purpose in having those names is that everyone can know and use the same name for a bird and can, therefore, be certain that when *we* use a name it will really identify the bird to *someone else*. That may not be true when we use the common names, because many species have several different common names. They have several different names, in part, because we keep giving them new ones.

A dove that once existed on the island of Socorro was first described by, and was named for, a fellow whose last name was Grayson. It was "Grayson's mourning dove" (*Zenaida macroura graysoni*), which people often shortened to Grayson's dove. Because it was native to Socorro Island, some called it Socorro mourning dove or, for short, the Socorro dove. Later, careful study of the bird led to a determination that it was not a mourning dove subspecies, but a totally distinct species. The old species name "*macroura*" was dropped and the bird became *Zenaida graysoni*, Grayson's dove. Recent articles in these pages, about efforts to reintroduce the "Socorro" or Grayson's dove to Socorro Island, correctly pointed out that the bird was not a subspecies of the mourning dove, but the authors surely confused some of us by also using the old scientific name (*Zenaida macroura graysoni*) which clearly indicates that the bird is a subspecies of the mourning dove.

One of the most popular pet parrots is the blue-fronted Amazon, and it is available in two slightly different models, one with red at the bend of the wing and the other with yellow. The bird with the



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yellow used to be a Chaco blue-front. Chaco is an area in the home range of the yellower form, so the name was appropriate in identifying the bird. Then some bubblehead discovered that part of the scientific name for that form of the blue-front meant "yellow-winged," so he started calling it the yellow-winged Amazon. In fact, this is incorrect: the scientific name for the bird *could* be construed as meaning "yellow-winged blue-fronted Amazon," but *not* yellow-winged Amazon. By eliminating the information that this bird is really a blue-front, the snazzy new name leads some to think that it is a different species — the yellow-winged Amazon.

So, now, some folks have blue-fronts, some have Chaco blue-fronts, a growing number have yellow-wings, and a few poor souls are stuck with yellow-winged blue-fronted Amazons. Before long, someone will announce with great fanfare that he or she has a four way hybrid and someone else will attack that person for hybridizing!

If all the people involved in this kind of nonsense would simply learn and use the scientific names properly, the world of aviculture would be no less rich or varied, but it would be a lot less confusing. More importantly, aviculturists might begin to appear a bit more knowledgeable, and more professional, than is now the case.

The naming system is simple; it is almost elegant in its simplicity. Every living thing has a name consisting of at least two words (most have three). The first word is the genus (always capitalized; plural is genera), the second is the species (not capitalized; plural is species), and the third is the subspecies (not capitalized, plural is subspecies). There never is one subspecies of an organism, there must be at least two if there are any. When a new form of an existing species is found and named as a subspecies, the original form *also becomes a subspecies*. The original form's species name is repeated as the subspecies name to show that this is the original form. Thus, the blue-fronted Amazon, *Amazona aestiva*, became *two* subspecies: *Amazona aestiva aestiva* and *Amazona aestiva xanthopteryx*.

Being a species is not somehow better, higher class, or more sophisticated than being a subspecies. The naming system indicates relationships, not social standing. When birds have the same first (generic) name, they are fairly closely related and, the usual definition of a species notwithstanding, they often can interbreed successfully (the most common reason for them not doing so in the wild is that the two species live in different places). When they have the same first and second names, of course,

they are the same species and may, if they have third names, be the same or different subspecies.

The common names we give things usually describe a distinctive color or location related to the bird, or may be given to honor an individual, but rarely indicate relationship. Thus, all the *Amazona ochracephala* subspecies have distinctive common names (yellow head, yellow nape, etc.) that give no hint that all are the same species. Many birds, too, were given scientific species names at one point and it was realized later that they were subspecies of an existing, named form. If a serious taxonomist (one who studies naming) re-examined some of our popular species, a number of changes would be likely. In macaws, for example, scarlets and green-wings would almost certainly be combined as a single species and militaries and Buffon's probably would be, too.

A taxonomic review and reclassification of the genus *Amazona*, which, incidentally, would be an excellent subject for a graduate degree dissertation, would be likely to bring about numerous changes. Casual observation of wild-caught blue fronts, for example, suggests that the subspecific designations are not valid; that the patch of color on which they are based ranges from solid red to solid yellow, with numerous degrees of mixing of the two colors. *Amazona ochracephala* is a taxonomic can of worms. A review that included recommendations of appropriate common names might eliminate confusion and

make life easier for all of us interested in Amazons. At present, aviculturists seem to tack on "double" this and "magna" that almost randomly, as much to attract sales as for any other purpose. Perhaps, if publications required advertisers to include the currently accepted scientific name of subspecies offered for sale, some honest confusion and self-serving hype could be eliminated.

All this carping and whining is not without a purpose. Of all animal avocations, aviculture (except for the raptor branch) is the least organized and professional in attitude. Our lack of professionalism increases our exposure to criticism from the anti-captive-bird ninnies who view us — with some justification — as a bunch of careless amateurs playing with birds. Some of us probably should be viewed in that light, but many more of us have serious concerns about the future survival of avian species and hope to play a part in captive preservation of them. Despite our loud protestations of pure intent and noble cause, few of our critics will relax their negative attitudes until we demonstrate ourselves to be biologically knowledgeable, technically competent, professional avian managers and conservators. We have a long way to go, and may not have much time for the trip.

As always, the author would be delighted to receive (at 240 W. Center St., Moab, UT 84532) and respond to readers' cheers and jeers, comments and suggestions, accolades and castigations, and other well-thought-out remarks. ●

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