

Bird Names for Birds

Virtual or in-person lesson plan



Lesson Topic: Birds should have names that describe the bird, not names that honor humans. Learn about how our word choices matter, and how changing some bird names can make the world a more welcoming place for many People of Color.

Grades 4-8 with options for adjusting for elementary students **through high school and beyond**

This lesson packet includes:

- A google slides presentation to show kids with supporting notes for teachers. This can be used virtually or in-person. View the presentation here: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1pzT5CGdkVUSI4y5bwRM97QVqMgozBpbGmLrq28axprl/edit?usp=sharing>
- This lesson is geared towards older elementary and middle school kids, but there are suggestions below for adjusting it for older or younger students. Suggestions for discussion topics, creating research projects about this idea, and nature journaling activities to follow the lesson.
- List of 20 bird names from North America that need changing and a link to a list of 580+ names.

Summary:

A lot of birds have awesome names. Names like the Black-throated Blue Warbler and the Long-billed Dowitcher describe the bird's body. Some names describe where a bird lives (Northern Cardinal, Eastern Phoebe, American Avocet). Other names describe bird behavior (Cattle Egret, Ruddy Turnstone, Brown Creeper). Learning bird names is one of the best parts of diving into the bird world!

Some birds, though, are named for people – either the white person who “discovered” them or to honor someone. These human-bird names are problematic because they perpetuate colonialism and the racism associated with it. The names that these birds currently have—like Henslow's Sparrow or Audubon's Oriole—represent people who we should not honor today. These people lived lives that do not uphold the morals and standards the bird community should memorialize.

Some people feel that birds should have bird names, and that we should change the names to remove the honorifics.

Lesson ideas for classrooms:

For any of these lesson ideas: select a list of birds with human names (see list below). Connect kids with a bird: either assign them or let them pick. Give each kid their own bird or let several kids work on the same bird. Have students research their bird. Learning about what the bird looks like, where it lives, and how it behaves will help them think up new names for the bird. Have students propose a new name for their bird and their reasoning behind the change.

For young kids:

1. **Keep it simple:** Use the presentation for the bulk of the lesson. Be careful to adjust the words you use or to stop and explain new words. During the second half of the presentation where we meet birds that need new names, have kids suggest new names. Work together as a class to come up with a few names, possibly voting to pick one.

For older kids:

2. **Research the people:** If it is age-appropriate, have kids research the people that the birds are named for. What are the facts about that person's life or their beliefs that would keep us from honoring them today?
3. **Dive into Indigenous names:** Have kids try to find the Indigenous names for these birds. Add another layer by asking kids to first determine which languages are currently or were once spoken where they live. How do Native Americans refer to these birds? Discuss whether the bird naming committees should use these names instead. Why or why not?

For any age:

4. **Nature Journaling:** This lesson is great to pair with a nature journal entry. Have kids write about or draw their bird, what they learned about names, or their thoughts about using human names for birds.
5. **Practicing persuasion:** Have kids pretend that they need to convince someone that these bird names need changing. What would they say to change reluctant minds?
6. **Discuss or debate:** Discuss or debate whether bird names should be changed to remove human honorifics. You could also discuss how to change the bird names: who should make the decisions about names, should Indigenous names be used (if so, which ones), should the names be all behavior/range/descriptive?
7. **Make art:** Look at the art on the Bird Names for Birds website. Talk with kids about what that art means to them. Have them create their own art about this topic.

- a. We recommend using the Bird Names for Birds image created by Alex Holt. This image is of many different species of birds that need new names. Their current names are written near the bird but are scribbled out. You can find the image here:



<https://birdnamesforbirds.wordpress.com/bird-names-for-birds-art-alex-holt/>

- b. For high school or college aged students you may consider using the Dishonorifics Art created by Teresa Dendy. Be sure you view the work first before showing students the website AND be sensitive to how your students, especially people of color, may react to seeing these images. You can find the art here:

<https://birdnamesforbirds.wordpress.com/dishonorifics-teresa-dendy/>

Bird Names

Below are 20 bird names to get you started.

Here is a link to a spreadsheet with 152 North American bird names and a total list of more than 580 birds who have names that need changing: <https://bit.ly/CurrentBirdNames>

1. Clark's Grebe
2. Cooper's Hawk
3. Clark's Nutcracker
4. Lewis's Woodpecker
5. Townsend's Solitaire
6. Swainson's Thrush
7. Kirtland's Warbler
8. Swainson's Warbler
9. Wilson's Warbler
10. Henslow's Sparrow
11. LeConte's Sparrow
12. Lincoln's Sparrow
13. Smith's Longspur
14. Brewer's Blackbird
15. Audubon's Oriole
16. Steller's Eider
17. Wilson's Storm Petrel
18. Anna's Hummingbird
19. Allen's Hummingbird
20. Forster's Tern

Notes for teaching the lesson

Below are notes for slides in the presentation. The number next to the text denotes which slide these facts or teaching tips go with. These notes are also in the “speaker notes” section of the google slides.

3. Some bird names can describe the way a bird looks.

Read the bird name, describe the way the bird looks: “The black-throated Blue Warbler has a black throat and a blue back. The Long-billed Dowitcher is a type of Dowitcher. Who can guess why it’s called “long-billed”?”

4. These birds also have color in their name too: “ruddy” = that brown color on the Turnstone’s back. Brown Creepers are brown.

5. Describe the maps in an age-appropriate way, explaining that the colors represent where the birds are during the year. red/orange = migration/summer. Purple = year round. Blue = winter, yellow = migration.

6. It’s not important who exactly these men are or what they did - but they were the white scientists who “discovered” the bird.

7. Same as the last slide. Who Bachman was isn’t so important to this discussion. Just that a scientist named this bird after Bachman to honor him.

8. It’s important to remember that even though these white scientists were naming birds they ALREADY had names. The Native People living near that bird already knew about it and had ways of describing them. The map on the left is Wisconsin. Explain where the lakes are, where Door Co is. The map on the right shows the United States, and a bit of Canada and Mexico. Each color is a different group of Native Americans who lived on that land. Many of these people had different languages. That’s a LOT of bird names!

9. These people cared about birds - they named them, they watched them, learned from them. Birds were important to Native People.

Ojibwe is just one of the languages that Native People speak, and these people live in Northern Midwest and Southern Canada. Listen to the name they use for Sandhill Crane. Say it out loud.

10. Black - bellied Whistling Duck = describes the way it looks and the sound it makes

11. They’re mostly white birders and scientists. This group maintains the checklist for North American Birds. They made a decision on each and every bird name, and they are the ones who could make changes. Each year people (often scientists) petition this committee to make changes. Usually the changes are about new scientific discoveries: range changes in birds or birds that should be split into two species after a genetic discovery. People can also petition for changes that are for social justice.

12. This was a VERY recent name change. It happened in 2020! The bird used to be called “McCown’s Longspur”. McCown was a General in the Confederate Army (remind kids that was during the Civil War). He might have been a bird scientist, but because of his role in the Civil War he is also a symbol of slavery

and racism. We should not be honoring him today. This bird is now the Thick-billed Longspur. It's a "longspur" because of its long back toe, and this bird has a thick, dark bill. Perfect fit!

13. "This slide has no pictures because it's very important. Listen to these words. Close your eyes if that helps you listen better." Read the words. You can ask kids to explain what these words mean to them.

14. Photo is of a Steller's Sea Eagle.

15 – 26. Remember to ask a kid to describe the field marks of the bird (the way it looks: colors, where the colors are, shape of body/neck/beak/head. Have kids suggest new names for each bird!