

OYSTERCATCHER ETYMOLOGY

By P. B. HEPPLESTON

ABSTRACT

The derivation of the specific and subspecific names of the oystercatchers of the world is given as an appeal to the aesthetic sense of ornithologists.

The following account of the derivations of the scientific names of Oystercatchers is in the nature of a supplementary note to an earlier discussion of the species' taxonomy and distribution (Heppleston 1973). It is offered simply that it might appeal to the aesthetic sense of other ornithologists as much as it did to the writer's. Ecological research is by nature an objective discipline and scientific reporting appears to get more unemotional and clinical every year. I get pleasure from Oystercatchers far beyond the bounds of my research programmes; in particular the origins and uses of words as embodied in a name seem to give an added dimension to one's appreciation, as well as recalling to the romantic the halcyon days of the pioneer naturalists. Their day has, alas, almost gone for ever, but their powers of observation, and indeed many of those gentlemen by name, live on in the posterity of the subspecies.

The terminology of these notes follows Peters (1934) although certain status changes have been recently recommended (Heppleston 1973).

GENUS:

Haematopus (Gk. blood; eye) — most species have a bright red iris and eyelid in the adult.

SPECIES:

ostralegus (L. oyster; collect) — feeding on oysters (see later).
Eurasia and the Americas.

leucopodus (Gk. white; foot) — legs a very pale colour. S. America, Falklands.

ater (L. black) — plumage entirely black. S. America, Falklands.

fuliginosus (L. sooty) — a black Oystercatcher. Australia.

SUBSPECIES:

All are subspecies of *ostralegus*, except *fuliginosus fuliginosus*.

*palliatu*s (L. cloaked) — the head plumage is black, the back a lighter grey-black, giving the impression of a cloak. Eastern N. America.

ostralegus (see above for etymology) — North-west Europe.

occidentalis (L. of the west) — Great Britain; a distribution to the west of the main continent of Europe.

- longipes* (L. long; foot) — legs apparently longer than those of neighbouring forms. Central Russia.
- longirostris* (L. long; bill) — literal translation. Australia.
- ophthalmicus* (L. pertaining to the eye) — eye very distinctive (named on account of bright red colour?). Australia.
- fuliginosus* (L. sooty) — a black subspecies of *H. fuliginosus*. Australia.
- malacophaga* (L. soft; eater) — perhaps due to habit of eating soft foods such as earthworms and grubs that are plentiful in the inland breeding ranges frequented by this form. Faeroe Is, Iceland.
- galapagensis* (L. of the Galapagos) — locality name. Galapagos Is.
- osculans* (L. to kiss) — refers to a single (intermediate) form which shows characteristics of neighbouring groups (see Oxford English Dictionary). The details of these characters are not clear. Far East.
- unicolor* (L. of one colour) — plumage almost entirely uniform (black). Most other forms are pied. New Zealand.
- chathamensis* (L. of the Chathams) — locality name. Chatham Is (N.Z.).
- bachmani* (L.) — named after the Rev. Dr. Bachman, a friend of the great John James Audubon (Audubon 1838). Western N. America.
- frazari* (L.) — named by Brewster (1888) after M. Abott Frazar of Massachusetts, U.S.A., who collected the type specimen in 1887. California.
- prattii* (L.) — named by C. J. Maynard (1899) after "my friend Marland L. Pratt." Bahamas.
- durnfordi* (L.) — named by Sharpe (1896) after Henry Durnford, by whom the type specimen was collected and from whom it was purchased. S. America.
- meade-waldoi* (L.) — named by Bannerman (1913) after E. G. B. Meade-Waldo, a 19th century ornithologist of eminence who spent much time in the Canary Is., from where he collected this Oystercatcher. Canary Is.
- moquini* (L.) — named after Dr C. H. B. A. Moquin-Tandon, a 19th century Professor of Natural History in the Medical Faculty in Paris and author of works on Canary Is birds. S. Africa and (?) Canary Is.
- finschi* (L.) — named after Dr Otto Finsch, of Braunschweig, Germany, who was a world-wide collector and student of birds, especially Australasia (Martens 1897). New Zealand.
- reischeki* (L.) — named by Rothschild (1899) after A. Reischek who shot the type specimen in June 1885 at Kaipara, N.Z. New Zealand.

pitamay — name derived from ‘pitunay,’ a vernacular name of Indian origin. Peru.

The misnomer ‘Oyster-catcher’ was first used by North American ornithologists in the 18th century. If the birds do ever feed on oysters, it is a very rare occurrence, since oysters form sublittoral beds and are hardly ever exposed to the air; Oystercatchers are adapted to feed on exposed shellfish beds or mudflats, from which mussels, cockles and mud-dwelling worms form the bulk of their food supply.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that these birds *are* mis-named lends an air of curiosity and intrigue which, to some of us, proves an irresistible pull. Let us hope that our senses will never be dulled by economics to the point where we are incapable of appreciating the ‘hidden extras’ of ornithological research.

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