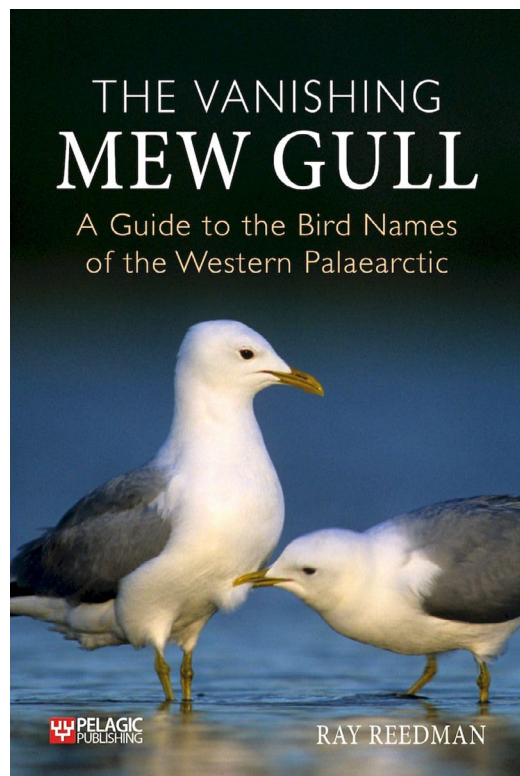


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RECENT NAME CHANGES IN ORNITHOLOGICAL TAXONOMY



Reedman R. 2024. The Vanishing Mew Gull: A Guide to the Bird Names of the Western Palearctic. Pelagic Publishing, London. 378 pp.

The title of this book symbolizes the many changes in the names of Palearctic birds of recent years. The action of splitting former subspecies raising them to full species has been more and more frequent. Why ‘*vanishing Mew gull*’? Two subspecies were historically recognized for *Larus canus*, the American one was named Mew gull, while the European one Common gull; with the definitive split of the two subspecies by International Ornithological Congress (IOC) the Mew gull *Larus brachyrhynchus* received the vernacular name of Short-billed gull. Mew gull name now is vanishing!

Regrettably, it has not yet been possible to arrive at a list of birds agreed upon by all countries, for various reasons there are still many differences between the HBW-BirdLife Checklist (2018) and the IOC World Bird List (2020). The most obvious differences are in the treatment of the genera of Laridae (e.g., *Croicocephalus* instead of *Larus*) and some Sylviidae traditionally included in the genus *Sylvia*, presently treated as *Curruca*. In addition, the sequence of bird lists changed following the recent genetic acquisition of affinities between different families.

Ray Reedman is an erudite ornithologist, very passionate about the Latin,

Greek and Central European etymological origins of both English vernacular and scientific names. In 2016 he had already addressed this issue in his book 'Lapwings, Loons and Loosy Jacks. The how and why of bird names', published by the same editor (see the review in Avocetta, 2016, 40: 97-99). In the present book Reedman follows the version 13.2 of the IOC World Bird List (available at <https://www.world-birdnames.org>), which, as above recorded, is different from the HBW-BirdLife Checklist, adopted by CISO (see Baccetti, Fracasso & COI, 2021. Avocetta, 45: 21-82). On the whole, the author reports entry information of about 1,100 scientific and vernacular bird names, other than some data on the distribution of cited taxa.

Of each species, the author mentions the current English and scientific name, the present distribution and, in the case of occasional species, the known records in Britain; he then explains the origin of the English name, often consisting of two words and not infrequently dedicated to a personage (providing an explanation), after which he moves on to the etymological explanation of the Latin name and often provides some additional notes that may prove useful. There are some very interesting etymologies; for example Vega Gull *Larus vegae* derives from an odd chain that has a bird at the end. It has its roots to Cape Vega in northern Siberia, but the cape itself was named after the Norwegian ship that made the first trip through the N-E Passage in 1878-1879, and the ship in turn was named after the

brightest star in the constellation Lyra. The ultimate root of that name lies in an Arabic word that was translated into Latin as the 'falling vulture'. Or the example of the Tristan Albatross, which is named after Tristan da Cunha, a group of islands in the South Atlantic where the bird breeds, but Tristan is named after the Portuguese explorer who gave his name to the main island in 1506. Some species have remained with different English names, one international, the other British [one example for all: Common Murre (international) and Common Guillemot (British) for *Uria aalge*].

I have some doubts about the use of *pygmaeus* (correct in Latin), when originally described as *pygmeus* (wrong in Latin). With respect to 'correct original spelling' and the cases in which such original spelling may be amended the rules governing are articles 32.3, 32.5 of the ICZN. However, if the subsequent spelling is in prevalent use, then the subsequent spelling must be retained (whether unjustified emendation, see art. 33.2.3.1, or incorrect subsequent spelling, see art. 33.3.1). In the cases of *Calidris pygmaea* and *Microcarbo pygmaeus* it seems that they are not in prevalent use; thus the correct names should be *Calidris pygmea* and *Microcarbo pygmeus*. Besides, *Nannopterum* is neuter, thus *Nannopterum auritum*; *Butorides* is masculine, thus *Butorides striatus*. Francesco Cetti was a professor of Mathematics and naturalistic Sciences in the late 1770 in the newly established University of Sassari (Sardinia) and in 1776 he published 'Gli Uccelli di

Sardegna' (Birds of Sardinia); his observations on the Cetti's warbler were carried out in Sardinia, not in Sicily.

I must point out that the author does not always take into account the officially recognized Palaearctic subspecies; however, he writes at pag. 320 "This area has not been treated exhaustively in the species entries, though some more obvious cases, such as the Mew Gull of the title, is considered". Nevertheless, I would cite just two examples of subspecies that deserve to be studied in depth, the Long-tailed tit *Aegithalos caudatus* and the European Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*. Many subspecies have been recognized of the former bird, some of which have a clear geographic isolated distribution. The latter is known to have clearly separated populations in the Atlantic (subspecies *pelagicus*) and the Mediterranean (subspecies *melitensis*), so much so that they now even have different English names: Atlantic Storm Petrel and Mediterranean Storm Petrel. It is, however, very likely that the two subspecies will soon be separated as full species.

Apart from these minor inconsistencies, I believe that this book will remain for many years the must-have reference for anyone wanting to know the etymology of English and Latin bird terms. This book really does contain a wealth of information on the origin of bird names, and objectively Reedman has surpassed himself by writing the last word on the subject, at least for the species known from the Western Palaearctic.

At the end of the book Reedman reports that the American Ornithological Society in November 2023 announced the intention to remove all eponyms (names of people recorded in the bird-names) from the vernacular names of American birds because some of those commemorated were linked historically to aspects of slavery and colonialism. Of course such decision will open a debate; most vernacular bird-names dedicated to people have reason to exist, but to purge a few undeserved eponyms there is no point in erasing hundreds of years of ornithological history. I hope for a serene reconsideration of this hasty and above all ahistorical decision.

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