

Toponymy, Migration & Pigeon Peas

*Making etymological
connections between
birds of the Caribbean
and U.S. East Coast*



You could say I was born to birding, though I came to love birds as an adult. I was oblivious of the Caribbean connection to one of my favorite birds until my 30s. The bird species that sparked this connection—the commonly known Red-tailed Hawk—also shares its Latin name with my home country of Jamaica: *Buteo jamaicensis*. This discovery fueled my curiosity to find out what other birds shared an etymological link with the region of my origin that can be found in my home of New York and the general eastern U.S.

Learning the etymological histories of some bird names has helped me stay connected with my home country of Jamaica while increasing my appreciation and enjoyment of the birds I can find in my new home, New York City. I want to share these stories because I feel they may inspire other birders to learn about places they have connections with through bird name etymology.

Johann Friedrich Gmelin, a German naturalist, described *B. jamaicensis* in 1788 from a type specimen from the island, hence the specific epithet. There have been Red-tailed Hawk nesting pairs in my neighborhood of Greenwich Village, New York City, for more than a decade. I have watched the pairs court and mate, defend their territory, and incubate and care for their young until fledging.

After learning about the Latin name for Red-tailed Hawk, I became curious about some of the names of its subspecies as well. The subspecies of the Red-tailed Hawk I see in New York City, whose range includes the Caribbean, is the eastern subspecies (*B. j. borealis*). The northern variant is *B. j. abieticola*, a toponymous name meaning to “dwell in fir trees.” Toponymous names are based on places. The *abieticola* subspecies breeds in the boreal forests of Canada, which include balsam fir and other coniferous evergreens.

In James A. Jobling’s *Helm Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names*, bird names are organized into nine categories. The most common is morphological, a morphonym (“plumage, colors, and physical characteristics”). The Red-tailed Hawk is an example of a morphonymous bird name. The fourth most common origin is toponymous. The sixth most common is bionymous, or based on habitat. I focused on these types of names because of my interest in natural features and geography.

Growing up, I often heard the following saying: “chicken merry hawk deh near.” It is a cautionary proverb about the importance of being mindful. As a child, I was not curious about the specifics of the hawk. When I learned about the connection between the Red-tailed Hawk and Jamaica, I wondered if I had seen Red-tails my whole life and not noticed them. Or maybe, sadly, I ignored them. After all, I wasn’t a chicken. I didn’t have to choose between eyes down to scratch for food on the ground or heads up to watch out for aerial predators. All I had to do as a human was to focus on good behavior. When I moved to New York City in 2009, I did not consider myself a birder. But Red-tails here and back home made me reconsider myself as a bird person. After all, I also remember being on the lookout for the “John Crow,” a.k.a. the Turkey Vulture, because this bird was

Georgia Silvera Seamans

New York, New York





● The name of the Palm Warbler may seem odd to ABA Area birders, but for the author it is a reminder that members of this species spend significant portions of their lives in areas with palms, including in Jamaica.

Photo by © Chris Sloan

an omen. Everybody wanted a glimpse of the “Doctor Bird,” the endemic hummingbird also called Red-billed Streamertail, which is the country’s national bird.

The rest of this article will discuss three more species named for places and habitats within Caribbean ranges—the region where I was born—and which breed in eastern North America, where I live now.

The Palm Warbler, *Setophaga palmarum*, was also described by Johann Friedrich Gmelin, but from a specimen on the island of Hispaniola. Cabbage palmetto, *Sabal palmetto*, thickets are one of several habitats in their range used by Palm Warblers. Cabbage palmetto is also native to Cuba. Hispaniola has its own native palmetto, *Sabal domingensis* or Hispaniola palm. Most of the Palm Warbler’s diet is insects, which might be found in abundance on the small white aromatic flowers of the Hispaniola palm. The warblers are also known to eat fruit, which might include the drupes of the Hispaniola palm.

The distinctive russet-colored cap of the Palm Warbler makes the bird easy to pick out in mixed flocks on the ground. I have seen individual Palms and mixed flocks in my local park in New York City. Palm Warblers feed on the ground in Jamaica, too, and are the only warbler there to feed in open grass. The name Palm Warbler may seem odd for ABA Area birders encountering this species throughout the U.S. and Canada, but when I see a Palm Warbler the name reminds me this species spends significant portions of its life in Jamaica or elsewhere in the region.



ABOVE: ● The author has not yet connected with a Prothonotary Warbler, which sometimes appears in New York City as a rarity, but learning about the etymological history of its name has helped her take an added interest in the species. *Photo by © Jean Shum.*

RIGHT: ● When the author, who is originally from Jamaica, learned that the scientific name of the Red-tailed Hawk, a species she regularly encounters in New York City, is *Buteo jamaicensis*, she became interested in learning about the etymological history of birds she regularly sees as a way of feeling connected with Jamaica. *Photo by © Jean Shum.*

Many warblers sport yellow plumage. The Prothonotary Warbler's scientific name, *Protonotaria citrea*, is a shout-out to the bird's exuberant yellow feathers. The warbler was described from a Louisiana specimen in 1779 and placed in the genus *Protonotaria*, according to Jobling an homage to the yellow robes worn by members

of the Byzantine court. The specific epithet *citrea* is derived from the Latin "citreus," a reference to the citrus tree.

I don't typically chase rarities, but there have been a few times I couldn't resist and have twice missed seeing a Prothonotary Warbler in Central Park. This warbler is like a Pantone fan deck for yellow and gray. The bird doesn't remind me of citrus so much as other fruits I grew up eating. The warbler looks like the black seed and yellow aril of ackee. I'm also reminded of an open passionfruit whose black seeds are covered in juice-filled yellow arils. A Prothonotary Warbler perched in a tree looks so much like a ripe June plum.

South Florida has another species with a Caribbean place name: the Gray Kingbird, *Tyrannus dominicensis*. This kingbird was yet another



species first described by Gmelin, this time from a type specimen from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. Gmelin is credited with scientifically naming more than 290 bird species. *T. dominicensis* looks different from "my" local kingbird, the Eastern Kingbird, or

Tyrannus tyrannus. The former has a pale gray face and head, is stouter, and has a larger bill and a shorter tail.

Learning these things, I became interested in Gmelin as a historical figure, the person associated with bird names in connection with Jamaica and elsewhere throughout the Caribbean. The Gmelin family was well known in the pharmacy business in seventeenth century Tübingen, Germany. Writing in 1929, Otto Raubenheimer, a pharmacist, praised the Gmelins: "That this family of scientists originated in an apothecary shop, which is still in existence today, in the university town Tübingen, Württemberg, in the seventeenth century, is a credit to pharmacy, of which our profession can justly be proud. It is the ambition of every German pharmacist that his son, or one of his sons, shall be his successor, a rule which deserves adoption in our own country." The prolific and influential Johann Friedrich Gmelin was born on Aug. 8, 1748, and died at the age of 56.

There is nothing in Raubenheimer's biography that suggests Gmelin studied birds, although he named many of them. He earned an M.D. in 1769 and became a professor of medicine in 1780 after completing a Ph.D. in 1790. Gmelin published the thirteenth edition of Carl Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae*. It was with this publication that he entered the world of birds. *Systema Naturae* included birds described by ornithologist John Latham, author of *A General Synopsis of Birds*. Gmelin included Latham's species in *Systema Naturae*, assigning them Linnaean scientific binomials, preempting Latham's 1790 *Index Ornithologicus*.

bring Gmelin's bird observations back to New York City, this time with a less direct

Caribbean association, though one I am making the leap to connect, as you will see. He described a now-common resident of this city, the pigeon, in 1789: *Columba livia*. The specific epithet, *livia*, derives from the French *livide*, meaning "of a bluish-lead color," and the Latin *lividus*, defined as "of a bluish color, black-and-blue," making the pigeon's name morphonymous. The most common pigeon color morph is the blue-bar (wings).

A cousin of mine kept pigeons in my childhood backyard in Jamaica, as did a neighbor across the street. My cousin raised pigeons for homing and racing purposes. I think he also liked tending to them. My cousin would eventually donate his pigeons to our neighbor. Our yard abutted sugarcane fields—a classic example of suburban development from agricultural land. Mongooses would leave the cane fields and cross the stream to prey upon the

pigeons in the coop. The small Indian mongoose (*Urva auropunctata*) was first introduced to Jamaica in 1872 to control rats, which were devastating cane crops. In addition to preying on pigeons, mongooses hunt native species. The *Jamaica Observer* reported that mongooses might be responsible for the potential extinction of endemic birds such as the Jamaica Petrel (*Pterodroma caribbaea*).

And here is my final, regional connection, if I may be so bold: Rice and (pigeon) peas is a popular dish in Jamaica. The pigeon pea, *Cajanus cajan*, is an Afro-descendant food possibly named for the resemblance between

● Although the connection may seem odd, Rock Pigeons in New York City remind the author of a favorite Jamaican dish—rice and pigeon peas. Photo by © Jean Shum.



the pea and the pigeon's eye. Have you noticed the small iris and pupil to large sclera ratio of famous illustrated pigeons (think of the work of Rosemary Mosco and Mo Willems)? Don't see the likeness between the pigeon and its namesake pea? Doesn't matter; rice and peas are delicious. When my mum makes rice and peas now, she substitutes kidney beans, which is the alternative Jamaican restaurants use, too. Maybe a stretch, but as I bird in my chosen home of New York, I have familiar birds around me to harken memories of my birth country, through their arcane etymology.

Works Referenced

- Jamaica Observer. 2009 (May 16).
Jamaica and invasive species.
<https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/2009/05/16/jamaica-and-invasive-species/>.
- Jobling, J. A., editor. *The Key to Scientific Names*. In: *Birds of the World*. Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca NY.
- Jobling, J. A. 2010. *The Helm Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names: From Aalge to Zusii*. www.avesdecostarica.org/uploads/7/0/1/0/70104897/scientific-bird-names.pdf.
- Largen, M. J. 1987. Bird specimens purchased by Lord Stanley at the sale of the Leverian Museum in 1806, including those still extant in the collections of the Liverpool Museum. *Archives of Natural History* 14(3): 265–288.
- Monaco Nature Encyclopedia. <https://www.monacatureencyclopedia.com/sabal-domingensis/?lang=en>.
- Raubenheimer, O. 1930. Gmelin, a German family of pharmacists, chemists and botanists. *The Journal of the American Pharmaceutical Association* 19(3): 259–265. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jps.3080190315>.
- Wilson, H. W., Jr. Palm Warbler, *Setophaga palmarum*. *Birds of the World*. <https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/species/palwar/cur/introduction>. 🌐

