

Nature note: Changing Names

I was walking past one of the big rape fields that dominate much of our countryside now, when I heard a familiar song coming from the middle of the crop. A familiar song, but in an unfamiliar place. A bird with a jet-black head and a dazzling white collar was intoning a tuneless jingle from the top of a tall stem. It was a reed bunting (a very handsome bird, but a strong candidate for Britain's worst songster). You do still get reed buntings in reedbeds, but as our wetlands have been drained and have contracted in area they have spread out to drier habitats as well. It's an example of how birds adapt to the changing environment. They ought really to be called 'field buntings' now. Marsh harriers, too, often nest in arable crops these days, while marsh tits have become birds of woodland.



Contributed

Reed Bunting

It got me thinking about other cases where a bird has outlived its name. We lost the corncrake from the corn fields around here over 100 years ago and the corn buntings are on the way out, too. You won't find any garden warblers in your garden, unless you're lucky enough to have a semi-woodland shrubbery. Meanwhile, the poor old sparrow-hawks can no longer survive on a diet of house sparrows, which have gone into a steep decline, despite the massive numbers of new houses being built. Nor could herring gulls still manage on the depleted herring stocks off the East coast (our so-called 'seagulls' have become city scavengers). While the barn owls have become very short of old barns to nest in and should probably be renamed box owls.

In other cases, it's an expansion not a decline that has rendered an old name misleading. Chaffinches don't just scabble around for grains in the chaff of a threshing floor any more, nor do linnets survive only on linseed. And the population of wood pigeons has exploded way beyond woodlands into every garden tree they can commandeer.

Some names never made sense to start with. Mute swans are far from silent, as you'll know if you provoke their threatening hisses and growls. The common gull isn't at all common most of the year in England. And the oystercatcher doesn't enjoy such an exclusively gourmet menu. The meanings of other names are buried deep in their origins. 'Pheasant', for example, literally means 'the bird of Phasis', a river near the Black Sea, from where they were introduced into Europe over 2,000 years ago.

It all reminds one of Humpty Dumpty's dictum in Alice in Wonderland: 'When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean.'

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