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Renaming a bill type for Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*)

Richard Littauer 

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ABSTRACT

A subspecies of Tundra Swan, the Bewick's Swan (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) has patterns of yellow areas on its bill. The schema for identifying individual bill-types includes a term which is known to be offensive, used for bills which are predominantly black. Following other movements to decolonialize and reject antiquated and offensive terms, I suggest that we rename this term going forward.

KEYWORDS

Bill typing; decolonialization; names; nomenclature; swans

SLEUTELWOORDEN

Dekolonisatie; namen; nomenclatuur; snaveltypering; zwanen

Een nieuwe naam voor het snaveltype van de Fluitzwaan (*Cygnus columbianus*)

TRANS-ABSTRACT

Een ondersoort van de fluitzwaan *Cygnus columbianus*, de *C. columbianus bewickii*, heeft een patroon van gele vlekken op de snavel. Het schema waarmee individuele snavel-typen worden geïdentificeerd bevat een term die bekend is als aanstootgevend, gebruikt voor snavels die overwegend zwart zijn. In navolging van andere bewegingen van dekolonisatie en het afwerpen van verouderde en beledigende termen, suggereer ik dat we vooruitgaand deze term veranderen.

A subspecies of Tundra Swan, the Bewick's Swan (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) has patterns of yellow areas on its bill. The amount and shape of the yellow areas can signal sexual fitness (Ciach et al. 2018) and can be used by researchers in the field to identify individual birds (Scott 1978). These patterns were first described by Scott (1966), in a paper which describes many ways of describing bills, using various terms: “darky,” “yellow neb,” “shieldy,” “toothy,” “tear-drop,” “wavy,” “steppy,” and so on. Scott (1981) focuses solely on the amount of yellow seen in the culmen, reusing three of these terms: “lack[ing] (darky), intermediate (pennyface), or yellow (yellow neb).” Her bill-type definitions have continued to be cited for both Bewick's Swans (Evans 1977; Evans and Sladen 1980; Rees 1980; Scott 1981; Voous 2000; Ciach et al. 2018), Whistling Swans (*C. columbianus columbianus*; Scott 1981), and for Whooper Swans (*C. cygnus*; Brazil 1981; Ohtonen 1988).

The first bill-type term given in Scott (1966) refers to bills that are predominantly black, which are named “darky” (pl. “darkies”). Regardless of the original intent, the word “darky” is now considered offensive to some communities (Henderson 2003). In particular, it is

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“used as an insulting and contemptuous term for a Black Person” (Merriam-Webster [n.d.](#)), and is “often offensive or derogatory” in British, South African, American, Australian and New Zealand English (Oxford University Press [n.d.](#)).

I suggest that we rename the term for dark-billed birds to simply “dark,” which is not stigmatized. This suggestion follows other movements to decolonialize and reject antiquated and offensive terms (AOS 2020, Bird Names for Birds 2020; Chala et al. 2024). STEM (Fry et al. 2021), avian taxonomic nomenclature (Sangster 2025), and birdwatching (Rutter et al. 2021) all suffer from disparities in racial demographics, and perceived microaggressions have been shown to negatively impact underrepresented groups in science (Anderson 2017; Harrison and Tanner 2018; Williams 2021). We as a field should work toward better outcomes for underrepresented groups. The change advocated in this paper is a small step toward that goal.

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