The book cover features a vibrant blue background with 100 small, colorful illustrations of various birds, each enclosed in a torn-edge paper frame. The birds are arranged in a grid-like pattern around the central text. The central text is in a white, serif font. The birds include species like swallows, cardinals, robins, and various songbirds.

# 100 Birds

and How They  
Got Their Names

A large, detailed illustration of a roseate spoonbill, a wading bird with a long, flat bill and pinkish feathers, is positioned in the center of the cover.

DIANA WELLS

Illustrated by Lauren Jarrett

# 100 BIRDS

*and How They Got Their Names*



DIANA WELLS

*Illustrated by  
Lauren Jarrett*

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill



*For C. A. W.,  
brilliant example of mate selection,  
and all our children*

# CONTENTS

*Introduction*

Albatross

Avocet

Bird of Paradise

Bittern

Blackbird

Bluebird

Bobwhite

Bunting

Capercaillie

Cardinal

Chaffinch

Coot

Cormorant

Cowbird

Crane

Crow

Cuckoo

Curlew

Dipper

Duck

Eagle

Egret

Emu and Cassowary

Falcon

Flamingo

Flicker

Flycatcher

Frigatebird

Gannet and Booby

Goatsucker

Goldfinch

Goose

Grackle

Grebe

Grouse

Gull

Hawk

Heron

Hoatzin

Hummingbird

Ibis

Jay

Kestrel

Kingbird

Kingfisher

Kite

Kittiwake

Kiwi

Lark

Limpkin

Loon

Magpie

Merlin

Mockingbird and Catbird

Nightingale

Nuthatch

Oriole

Osprey

Ostrich

Owl

Parrot  
Partridge  
Peacock  
Pelican  
Penguin  
Petrel  
Phalarope  
Pheasant  
Phoebe  
Pigeon or Dove  
Plover  
Puffin  
Quail  
Raven  
Rhea  
Roadrunner  
Robin  
Sandpiper  
Sapsucker  
Secretary Bird  
Shrike  
Skimmer  
Skua  
Snakebird  
Sparrow  
Starling  
Stork  
Swallow  
Swan  
Swift  
Tanager  
Thrush

Titmouse and Chickadee

Turkey

Vulture

Wagtail

Warbler

Woodcock and Snipe

Woodpecker

Wren

*Selected Bibliography*

*Index*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I needed, and received, a great deal of help with this book. Especially appreciated were the professional skills and unflagging enthusiasm of Peter Kupersmith, Janet Klaessig, Charlie Colombo and the rest of the staff at the Joseph Krauskopf Memorial Library, Delaware Valley College, Pennsylvania. I thank my brother, David Greig (loved all my life, but lover of birds long before me) for his help. Also David Steward for his contagious fondness for birds. Eric Salzman gave me valuable ornithological advice, and my copy editor Bonnie Thompson rescued me from many a blunder. Henrietta Leyser raids the Bodleian library on demand, Claire Wilson keeps me alert with her uncompromising grammatical integrity, Inea Bushnaq guides me in Arabic language and culture, and Leslie Hartnett took time to read the manuscript. My brother, Andrew Greig, advised me on Australia. I thank Amy Gash for her affectionate encouragement and firm but tender editing. I thank Elisabeth Scharlatt and all the Algonquin staff for their trust, and Betsy Amster for being my excellent agent. I thank Peg Stevens for making it seem possible (when it didn't). And I thank John and Bar Purser and Geraldine Lloyd for the walk on which they showed me the dipper.

## INTRODUCTION

In the most inhospitable places on earth we find birds: sailors tossing on the lonely, stormy seas see ocean birds following their ships; antarctic explorers were met by upright, curiously formal penguins, clustering round to see who had arrived on their bleak ice floes; in the middle of the most arid deserts sand grouse nest, flying miles to soak their feathers with water to bring back for their thirsty young; high above the tree line on craggy mountains there are birds; in the long darkness of sleepless nights we hear owls hunting.

It is hard to imagine a place in the world without birds. Indeed a world without birds would be hell itself. In the Sixth Book of *The Aeneid* Virgil wrote, “The descent into Hell is easy” (“Facilis descensus Averno”). The word for hell, “Averno,” means “a place without birds,” from the Greek *a* “without,” and *ornis*, “bird.” Avernus, the entrance to hell, was a toxic Italian lake, the fumes from which were said to kill all birds.

“All birds are called Birds,” claims a medieval bestiary, “but there are a lot of them . . . there are so many sorts . . . that it is not possible to learn every one.” How true for most of us this still is. Even with binoculars, books and cameras, the names of birds still elude us. Not only is it hard to distinguish one bird from another, but the names themselves are confusing. Speaking for myself, I found that birds were not like flowers, whose names had become familiar to me with my first book, and anyway seemed easier to learn. Flowers stay put to be identified, but birds fly away far too quickly. The flash in the bushes too often disappeared long before I could get my glasses adjusted, and sometimes when I had a bird and its name nicely sorted I then found it had been reclassified and I had to start again! Real birders (or twitchers as they are called in Britain) love this challenge, and make lists of birds they have seen and identified, the rarer the better. They travel for miles, squat in muddy bogs, tear their clothes in briars and rise at unwelcoming hours, when the rest of us are sybaritically turning over in bed, or lazily making toast and watching what we glibly call “sparrows,” “thrushes,” and “robins” around our bird feeders.

“A robin is a robin, is a robin,” we faintly gasp when confronted with a World Checklist of scientific bird names, or a knowledgeable birder in a bog. But we do need to know a little more, if only because robins in America and in Britain are entirely different birds. Blackbirds, orioles, sparrows, warblers, to name only some, refer to different birds in different places.

In America, many birds were named by early naturalists, often European, who sometimes called them after similar birds back home. Mark Catesby, an English naturalist who explored the southern states in the early eighteenth century, wrote that “Very few of the Birds having Names consigned to them . . . except some which had Indian Names, I have call’d them after European birds.” Catesby would have caused less confusion and fewer ornithological headaches if he had taken notice of the names used by the “Indians.” Some of the headaches have been shared by me as I have tried to unravel these confusions.

It’s a pity if confusion with names puts us off and lessens our enjoyment of some of

the loveliest creatures on earth. People can, and always have, enjoyed birds without knowing much about them. On the other hand, to name something can be to understand it a little better. “To know one thing from another,” wrote Linnaeus, “permanent distinct names must be given . . . recorded and remembered.” In 1753 he began sorting the names of plants, animals and birds, and we have been using his system ever since. But Linnaeus would not have wanted us to tremble at the thought of names, for he was trying to simplify, not complicate the system. Latin was the common language of his time, used by scientists to write to one another. Linnaeus himself refused to learn any contemporary European language but his native Swedish, and he couldn’t have envisaged a time when all naturalists didn’t speak Latin.

All scientific names are Latinized, even if their origins are Greek or from the names of places or people. Linnaeus’s new system gave each creature, and plant, two names, that of its genus (or kind), and that of its species (or individual characteristic). Before that, scientific names were long and descriptive. Even if we find our present system hard, using only two (or sometimes three) names, was a great improvement. Linnaeus grouped genera into families, and families into orders. An order (or group of families) always has a name ending in the suffix “-iformes,” and a family name always ends with the suffix “-idae.” The name of the genus is a noun (capitalized), followed by the name of the species, an adjective (not capitalized). Birds are also grouped into subfamilies, tribes and qualifying specific names, but I have tried to avoid these and keep scientific names as simple as possible.

We aren’t helped by taxonomists *changing* names, because a bird can be reclassified and renamed if it is found to belong to a different group than previously thought. In our era of DNA testing, this happens rather often. It is of small comfort to know that otherwise the accepted name is the one given by Linnaeus in January 1758, or the first name recorded after that date, even if this name seems inappropriate or was misspelled.

Understanding bird names is a combination of ornithology, taxonomy, and etymology, all professional fields, and none of them my own. Nor can I hope to touch on more than a few birds in one short book. But looking at names, at how birds were called in the past and why, connects us to our close relationship with them. Birds have been part of our lives since the beginning of human time. Some of the earliest Egyptian and Persian gods were in the form of birds. Greek gods were shaped like humans, but sometimes even they turned into birds to lure or punish mortals with whom they were so reassuringly intimate.

Part of this fascination with birds was the ability (of most of them) to fly, toward where we thought heaven might be. If, like Icarus, we fell, it was not because of inadequate wings, but because of our inadequate attachment of them. Our angels (unless they are “fallen angels”), still have the feathery wings of birds, not the wings of bats or beetles. It doesn’t seem to bother us that the wings attached to their shoulders couldn’t possibly get them airborne. For angels lack the powerful muscles attached to a deep-keeled breastbone, which birds developed in order to fly, and angels don’t, as far as I know, have the light, toothless jaws or hollow bones of birds. If they have human voice boxes, our angels could never sing like birds either. Birds make their music in a voice box (or syrinx) placed much lower than ours, where the

bronchial tubes divide. Unlike humans, birds can vary their song by taking in air from two directions rather than one. Perhaps that's why our angels are often equipped with harps and lutes.

Not all birds fly or sing sweetly either, but a bird is differentiated from other creatures because it has feathers. Feathers are evolutionary miracles, and nothing we can invent equals them. They are strong and stiff enough to resist air pressure (and be used by us as pens), warm enough to keep penguins cozy in the antarctic (and soft enough to pillow the heads of human potentates).

Birds have been used (and abused) by us as far back as we know. They were eaten, they were kept in cages for their songs, their feathers were used for warmth and decoration. Their ways were used to guide us too. The Greeks knew that when swallows arrived, spring was near. The Vikings loosed birds from their ships and followed the direction in which they flew to find new lands. The Romans used birds to help them make decisions, by dividing the sky into quarters and watching how birds flew across. This practice was called augury, and gave us the word "auspice," from the Latin *aves specere*, "to watch birds." Nowadays we are apt to rely more on computer projections to predict our future, but these results are sometimes dismissed as "for the birds."

Birds are in our language, whether we know it or not. In the old days, horse droppings on the streets were only good "for the birds" (usually sparrows) to eat. When we "hoodwink" someone we are using a term to describe sealing the eyes of a hunting bird to keep it docile. When we do something with "panache" we are being jaunty, as if wearing a feather (Latin *pinnaculum*) on our hat. When we are "ravenous" we will, like a raven, eat anything.

It was always true that I loved words and birds. But the study of birds is the sole occupation of many people, and I never could hope to have their expertise. To write about birds was, for me, bold indeed. My greatest encouragement came from a letter written by Alexander Wilson to the famous naturalist William Bartram. Wilson came to America from Scotland at the end of the nineteenth century. He was a weaver, a poet and a political reformist. Soon after his arrival he decided he was a "wretch separate from the great chain of nature," and he began to study American birds, even though he knew nothing about them. Wilson sent Bartram a descriptive list of birds, asking him to "Be pleased to mark the Names of each with a pencil as except 3 or 4 I dont know any of them." From these three or four names, Wilson eventually went on to write the first, and one of the most comprehensive books on American birds ever. It is not now an ultimate authority, but it is still useful today, and wonderfully readable. Wilson went out into the field himself to observe and collect his own information. Naturalists like him were called "field" as opposed to "closet" (or "cabinet") naturalists, who were sent specimens to classify but didn't venture into the wild. Ornithologists today expect to go out and study birds for themselves.

I confess to being a "closet naturalist." I do not struggle through thorny mires at dawn to spot an unknown bird, and if you were to ask me to identify a bird I might pretend to have lost my spectacles. Lists still frighten me, and I confuse Latin names. But for all my ignorance, birds are in my blood now, in a way they never could have been before I began this book, and I look at them anew.

I always knew what a curlew looked like, but had never seen one. Last year I saw a curlew in Scotland, and I felt my world had changed forever. I wanted nothing more than that curlews should be on the moors forever. Like all passions, my love is now tinged with a fear of loss. When I knew birds less, I didn't worry much about whether they had enough space to live in the world along with us. The more I came to know them, the more I valued these wondrous creatures. Emily Dickinson wrote about these only feathered beings that we know:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all—

Without hope, without feathers, we would be—lost in hell.

## ALBATROSS



Albatrosses fly as if by magic, rarely flapping their long, narrow wings. At different heights above the ocean wind speeds vary dramatically. Albatrosses glide down swiftly to meet low-speed surface winds, which then thrust them up again, and they repeat this to soar almost indefinitely. To sailors long ago this seemed supernatural, and they thought the birds were incarnations of wandering souls. To kill an albatross, they believed, would bring bad luck to the ship and its crew.

“An albatross around one’s neck” has been part of our language ever since Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote of the cursed seaman in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”; but in spite of his vivid description of the great bird circling the ship and perching on the rigging like “a Christian soul,” it is unlikely that Coleridge saw a living albatross. The story probably originated in 1759 from Captain George Shelvocke’s account in his *Voyages*, which described an albatross soaring around the ship, following “as if he had lost himself” and making “our display with sail, reef and rudder” seem “clumsy and inept.” His ship, the *Speedwell*, was battling to round Cape Horn in terrible weather, and one sailor had already been lost overboard in the icy sea. The second in command was Simon Hatley, who in a fit of “melancholy,” shot the albatross in September 1719, and was blamed for the ship’s continued bad luck. Hatley had been imprisoned by the Spaniards and punished for privateering by being “hanged until [he was] almost strangled and then cut down.” This torture is reminiscent of the heavy albatross around the Ancient Mariner’s neck.

Although sailors were in awe of these birds, they did sometimes kill and eat them, and even made purses out of their webbed feet. The albatross’s common name has prosaic roots. It originates from the Arabic *alqudus*, “bucket,” describing seabirds that hold water in their bills (see Pelican). This became *alcatraz* in Spanish (which now

means “gannet”). The Latin *alba* means “white,” and mature albatrosses of some species are largely white, which may explain the change to “albatross.”

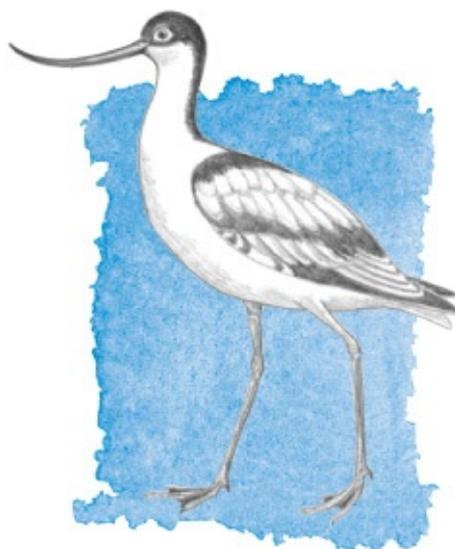
 **Albatrosses fly as if by magic; sailors thought the birds were incarnations of wandering souls.**

Albatrosses are in the order Procellariiformes, from the Latin *procella*, meaning a violent storm. These ocean birds live in turbulent southern oceans remote from land. Their bills are “tubed” to excrete excess salt from the seawater they drink (*see* Petrel). They can’t fly when they are becalmed. Although they come ashore to breed, a pair often won’t even wait for their chick to fledge; the parents will feed it enough so that it can survive alone on its fat until making its way to the sea.

The albatross family, the Diomedidae, is called after Diomedes, the king of Aetolia, who fought in the Trojan War. On his way home he stopped on an Adriatic island; there his companions were punished for grumbling by being turned into birds, “like white swans, though they were not swans,” wrote Ovid. Despite the wandering albatross’s obvious difference from swans, Linnaeus named the legendary bird after Diomedes’s men, calling it *Diomedea exulans*, or “homeless.” This bird has a wingspan of up to twelve feet and travels hundreds of miles. It is now thought to return to favorite fishing areas rather than wandering aimlessly.

The albatrosses that most often visit North American waters are the *Phoebastria* (from *phoibetria*, a “prophet”), but few of us will ever see these. Still, the albatross is with us, a powerful symbol of sin and retribution. We wonder, too, like Coleridge’s Wedding Guest, what our duties to the natural world should be.

## AVOCET



In June 1814, John James Audubon rose at dawn to watch nesting avocets on a lake in Indiana. “Now Reader,” he writes, “wait a few moments until I eat my humble breakfast . . . [and] you and I will do our best to approach the sitting bird unseen by it.” He does this successfully: “Lovely bird,” he murmurs, “how innocent, how unsuspecting, and yet how near to thine enemy, albeit he be an admirer of thy race!” At this point the Reader might prefer to be excused, leaving Audubon to shoot five avocets, including three incubating females. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that in those days, before photography and good binoculars, shooting a bird was the only way to examine it properly, and avocets, like other birds, once seemed too plentiful ever to become rare.

The American avocet that Audubon described is mostly white, with a chestnut head during mating season, and black markings on the wings. White birds often have black wing tips, because black feathers are stronger than pigmentless white ones and wear better on the edges of wings. The American avocet has long blue legs and an upward-curving bill, which accounts for the family name *Recurvirostridae*, from the Latin *recurvo*, “I bend backward,” and *rostrum*, “beak.” The members of this family include the stilts. The American avocet and the black-necked stilt breed in North America. Stilts have thin red legs, even longer than the avocets’. The stilt’s name, *Himantopus*, is from the Greek *himantos*, “thong,” and *pous*, “foot.”

The avocet’s common name comes from the old European *Recurvirostra avosetta*, first used in 1600 by the Italian naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi. This might be from *avis* (Latin for “bird”), a fondly diminutive description of the avocet, a bird of peculiar beauty and grace. In 1678 *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby* (published posthumously by Willughby’s friend and collaborator John Ray) described the bird as “The Avosetta of the Italians.” Its harsh cry is less bewitching than its appearance, and in Dutch the avocet is *kluut*, in imitation of this. In northern England they were also called “clickers” (because they sometimes click their bills) and “awl-birds.”

 **The avocet, “from its perpetual clamor and flippancy of tongue, is called the Lawyer,” wrote Alexander Wilson.**

The awl-shaped beak is swept from side to side to collect food from the bottom of ponds. Avocets often feed in stagnant water, and consequently are very prone to tapeworms. The famous nineteenth-century ornithologist Alexander Wilson described an avocet he took as “infested with tape-worms and a number of smaller bot-like worms.”

Wilson also wrote that the avocet, “from its perpetual clamor and flippancy of tongue, is called by the inhabitants of Cape May, the Lawyer.” It is rather tempting to connect this with the Latin stem *avocatio*, “a diversion,” the origin of the French *avocat*, “Lawyer.” But there seems to be no traceable link here, and, regretfully, we must relinquish the “flippancy of tongue” required to make one!

## BIRD OF PARADISE



It might seem that birds of paradise were deservedly named for their beautiful plumage. Instead the name more likely comes from a sixteenth-century misperception that they had no wings or feet with which to fly or perch, and therefore floated ethereally in the heavens.

When dried skins of birds of paradise were first brought to Europe from New Guinea, they were described as being without feet or wings. Such was the way they were used in New Guinea for decoration. But Europeans, who had never tried this way of preserving birds, assumed that the dried skins were complete.

The first skins from New Guinea were brought to Madrid by Juan Sebastián de Elcano, who had taken over the *Vittoria* after its first commander, Ferdinand Magellan, was killed. Elcano took the ship to the Moluccas, arriving at the island of Tidore in November 1521. The sultan of Batjan presented the crew with skins for the king of Spain. When asked how the birds managed without wings or feet, the sultan reputedly replied that they were *manuk dewata*, or “Birds of the Gods,” a name still reflected in the genus of some paradise birds, *Manucodia*.

Linnaeus’s name for the great bird of paradise, *Paradisaea apoda*, means “without feet” (Greek *a*, “without,” and *pous*, “feet”), although by his time the birds were no longer thought footless. The name “paradise,” or heaven, is from the Persian *paradeisos*, meaning an enclosed garden, which was what heaven was supposed to be.

For a long time European naturalists had speculated on the behavior of birds of paradise, concluding that after mating in the air, the female laid her eggs in a hollow on the male’s back. His spectacular wiry tail was intended, they thought, to secure her

while she incubated the eggs. It was also useful for tethering him to a tree when he wanted to stop floating. The name *Cicinnurus*, used for several birds of paradise, comes from the Greek *kikennes*, “ringlet,” and describes this curious curling tail.

 **The name comes from a sixteenth-century misperception that these birds had no wings or feet and floated ethereally in the heavens.**

It was not until the nineteenth century that European naturalists saw birds of paradise in the wild. René Lesson, on an expedition aboard the *Coquille*, wrote that he was “too astonished to shoot” the first bird of paradise he saw, because of its extraordinary beauty, “like a meteor . . . cutting through the air, leaving a long trail of light.” Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin’s contemporary, saw birds of paradise and described the male’s “lekking” display (see Peacock). The standard-winged bird of paradise, *Semioptera wallacii* (“partly feathered”), is named for Wallace.

Napoleon’s nephew Charles Bonaparte named the *Cicinnurus respublica* (now Wilson’s bird of paradise). “Since there is not to be a paradisaical republic there shall at least be a republican bird of paradise,” he wrote, demonstrating more than a touch of political disillusionment. Bonaparte also named the paradise crow, or *Lycocorax pyrrhopterus* (“red-winged crow”). But until recent DNA testing it was not definitely established that the bird of paradise’s nearest relative is the crow, not the bowerbird, as had always been thought.

Both birds of paradise and bowerbirds live in Australasia, where there are few predators other than humans. In this avian paradise they don’t have to be able to move quickly or be constantly on the alert. Male bowerbirds build elaborate ornamental “bowers” to attract females. They are unlikely to have their wooing interrupted and so can afford to indulge without danger in the luxurious sexual lures of cumbersome plumage or painstakingly constructed bowers.

## BITTERN



Although it's not a large bird, the cry of a bittern can echo for miles. Thoreau wrote that American bitterns were sometimes called “belcher-squelchers,” and they seemed to be calling, “Slug-toot, slug-toot, slug-toot.” They move back and forth when sounding, using their whole bodies to choke up their booming cry, and are commonly called “thunder pumpers.” The European bittern has an even more powerful voice, described by Oliver Goldsmith as seeming to come from “some formidable being that resided at the bottom of the water.”

Bitterns are closely related to herons. They live solitary lives in marshes, spearing their prey, mostly frogs, with pointed bills and nesting on the ground. Bitterns' eyes are positioned so they can see in front of them when their bills are turned vertically and beneath them when horizontal. There are two kinds of bittern, the *Botaurus* and the *Ixobrychus*, and both names derive from the birds' peculiar bellowing cries. *Botaurus* comes from the Latin *butire*, “to cry” (which also gives us “bittern”), and *taurus*, “a bull.”

The name *Ixobrychus* (from the Greek *ixos*, “reed,” and *brukho*, “roar”) was devised in 1828 by Gustav Johann Billberg, a Swedish naturalist (for whom a popular houseplant, the billbergia, was named). Bitterns have learned an extraordinary protective strategy. They can “freeze,” with their bills pointing directly upward and their striped bodies exactly matching the reeds surrounding them. Sometimes if there is a breeze they even sway a little to imitate their reedy camouflage. “This was its instinct,” wrote Thoreau, “whether it implies any conscious artifice or not.”

 Sometimes called “belcher-squelchers,” they seemed to be calling, “Slug-toot, slug-toot, slug-toot,” wrote Thoreau.

## BLACKBIRD



Those four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie were European blackbirds, which are a kind of thrush, not American blackbirds. Thrushes were considered a delicacy fit to “set before a king,” and indeed are still eaten in some parts of the world. Although in one seventeenth-century English cookbook blackbirds were considered “better to delight the eare with their musicke than to feed the belly,” in 1861 the famous Mrs. Beeton was still recommending “one blackbird to every two persons” in a recipe.

New World blackbirds were never a delicacy even though the scientific name of two of them is *Euphagus*, meaning in Greek “good to eat.” American blackbirds are not related to their European namesake. They are in the Icteridae family, and are known as Icterids which include grackles and New World orioles.

The name of the red-winged blackbird, familiar in the New World, is *Agelaius phoeniceus*. This comes from the Greek *agelaios*, “gregarious,” because these birds congregate in large flocks, except when raising their young. *Phoeniceus* is Latin for “red” (see Flamingo). The red “wings” are actually small patches on the male bird’s shoulders, which he uses to attract females and advertise breeding territory, a strategy similar to the confident warning statement once made by bright red military uniforms. Icterids share an important characteristic called “gaping,” a way of using their bills to wedge apart places where food might be hidden. A redwing blackbird will flip over a stone to find food by opening its bill under one side of the stone, causing it to roll over.

**🔪 In 1861 the famous Mrs. Beeton still recommended “one blackbird to every two persons” in her cookbook.**

The Icteridae get their name from the Greek *ikteros*, meaning “yellow” or “jaundiced,” referring to the color of European orioles, which *aren’t* Icterids (see Oriole)! And if blackbirds aren’t confusing enough, the old name for the European blackbird was the Anglo-Saxon *osle*, or Shakespeare’s “ouzel-cock so black of hue.” This is retained in the modern German for blackbird, *Amsel*. The English name ouzel is now used for another thrush, the ring ouzel and for the American dipper. Noted for its whistling song, the European blackbird also went by the old name of “merle.”