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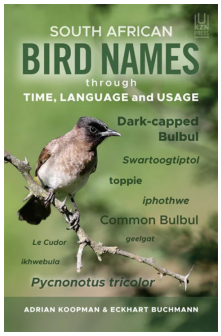
BOOK TITLE:
South African Bird Names through Time, Language and Usage



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Bird names and their histories in South Africa

South African Bird Names through Time, Language and Usage is a dense and wide-ranging text that focuses on onomastics – the origins, histories and usages of proper names – within the context of bird names, specifically those in South Africa. South Africa's complex colonial history as a far-flung but key outpost on the global trade routes from the 15th century onward, combined with its rich heritage of indigenous naming practices, produces a rewarding, although at times, exhausting reading experience.

Although the authors state, on more than one occasion, that the book is not about birds, it is true that one can learn a good deal about birds through an understanding of how they are named. "Birds do not need names to live their lives" (p. 27), but humans have always named birds in their own particular cultural ways: birds as food, as omens, as signifiers of seasonal change and as potent political and religious symbols. As the authors reveal throughout the book, names based on observations of behaviour, habitat and their relationship to people tell us a lot about the birds themselves: "the birds, their names, the users of these names, and the contexts in which they use these names are interconnected" (p. 26). For a scholar in the linguistic field of onomastics, the historical narratives of how South African birds came to be named provide a fascinating number of case studies.

The first three chapters lay the groundwork with precise descriptions of naming processes from scientific nomenclature to cultural practices. Thereafter, the chapters proceed historically and linguistically, focusing on particular groups of birds. For example, Chapter 4 considers early colonial names within the context of pelagic species, drawing on the observations and linguistic particularities of European explorers. There are chapters on English bird names, the development of scientific names, and several chapters on African bird names and the integration of scientific and vernacular naming practices.

These chapters build on Koopman's earlier book, *Zulu Bird Names and Bird Lore* (2019)[1], and so further develop the neglected field of indigenous relationships to the environment within the broader context of environmental conservation framed by Western epistemologies. I like, for example, the discussion on kites and kestrels, and how their names in various African languages are not merely descriptive but linked to the environments over which they hover (p. 212).

The book investigates and often challenges the curious colonial paths through which birds came to be named. This work is important. Birding communities are often resistant to change, and bird names themselves are often far more important than mere identifiers – they are powerful sources of nostalgia and identity. Popular bird names form part of the linguistic and cultural fabric of South Africa, reflecting the influence of and struggles against colonialism. Delving into scientific names, as this book does in great detail, deepens our understanding of how colonialism has shaped our environment, and how it continues to resonate in the 'neutral' spaces of genetic phylogeny.

I read the book trying to imagine myself as two different readers: as an academic with a broad knowledge of South African birds, and as someone interested in birds and bird identification, but perhaps less familiar with the terms and research approaches of etymology and literary history.

For the first reader, the book is an expedition through a constantly changing landscape of knowledge, and I found myself fascinated by the new knowledge I gained and the instances in which I was able to connect parts of what I know into a more coherent whole. I did not just learn how a bird got its name but, more importantly, the historical and cultural processes involved. For the second reader, the reference to onomastics and the very methodical approach to describing how the naming processes work, might appear pedantic. This is less the case later in the book when narrative and history become more prominent.

One of the strengths of the book is the way the authors introduce a complex onomastic discourse through an apparently 'simple' piece of descriptive writing, such as the opening to Chapter 8 where young Iris Vaughn's diary entry leads into a discussion of Dutch and Afrikaans bird names (p. 174). This narrative approach shows the tremendous value of literary and historical archival research to scientific knowledge. That said, the book gets deep into the weeds on linguistics at points; for example, the section on 'Statistical analysis of semantic categories' (p. 310) might seem especially esoteric for some readers. Also, the endless variety of examples also means that certain narratives scatter off into the bush at points.

South African Bird Names through Time, Language and Usage is a unique book. It is dense, immensely detailed, yet constantly fascinating. It will appeal to readers who are interested in a wide range of disciplines (history, linguistics, ornithology, biography, natural sciences) but might only be dipped into by people with an interest in only a few of those fields. Its application is not only academic, as it underlines the critical role such knowledge can play in encouraging conservation and avitourism.

While it is focused on South Africa, I believe it does apply more broadly in the global field of natural history, and it should find a readership of interested scholars and birders internationally.

Reference

1. Koopman A. Zulu bird names and bird lore. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press; 2019.

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