

blairbirding

Sharing pictures, stories, reflections of my birding adventures – past and present: great places, great people and great birds...



Audubon, Swainson, Cassin, Townsend, Steller,
Pallas and Wilson and the Birds Named After Them

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There will be at least two blog posts later on my recently ended excellent trip to North Carolina. One of the last birds seen on that trip was a **Swainson's Warbler**. It had been hoped for but I was not expecting to find one and certainly not expecting a photo. Thanks in large measure to the wonderful birding ear of my travel companion, Frank Caruso, we found one and it cooperated for a fine photo.

Swainson's Warbler



Earlier I had earlier seen my ABA first **Wilson's Storm Petrel** and my ABA first **Audubon's Shearwater** and the combination of the three made me wonder about the naming of these three species and maybe others that were named after people. So I went all bird nerdy and checked the AOU Checklist (the one before Hawaii was added – I will never accept that addition). I may well have missed some but found that there were 100 species on the list that appeared to be named after specific people – although I wasn't sure about **Anna's Hummingbird** and three warblers – **Lucy's**, **Grace's** and **Virginia's**. The vast majority were one-off mostly rarities like for example **Stejneger's Petrel**. Remove them and the list drops dramatically.

If thus limited to species where at least two are named after a specific person, the list has only 36 species. Drilling down a bit further, of those 36 there are 14 named after 7 individuals – like the **Bell's Sparrow** and **Bell's Vireo** named after John Graham Bell who accompanied John James Audubon on one of his trips. But it's my blog so I get to make executive decisions and I am using **Audubon's Warbler** instead of **Yellow Rumped Warbler** to move John James Audubon from that group of seven to the group of seven for whom at least three species are named.

Here then are the remaining 25 species where at least three are named after one individual – listed from most to fewest by their namesake.

- *John Cassin*: **Cassin's Auklet**, **Cassin's Sparrow**, **Cassin's Finch**, **Cassin's Kingbird** and **Cassin's Vireo**
- *Alexander Wilson*: **Wilson's Warbler**, **Wilson's Storm Petrel**, **Wilson's Snipe**, **Wilson's Plover** and **Wilson's Phalarope**.
- *William Swainson*: **Swainson's Warbler**, **Swainson's Thrush** and **Swainson's Hawk**

- *John Kirk Townsend*: **Townsend's Warbler, Townsend's Solitaire and Townsend's Storm Petrel**
- *Georg Steller*: **Steller's Eider, Steller's Jay and Steller's Sea Eagle**
- *Peter Simon Pallas*: **Pallas's Rosefinch, Pallas's Leaf Warbler, and Pallas's Bunting**
- *John James Audubon*: **Audubon's Shearwater, Audubon's Oriole and Audubon's Warbler** – currently lumped with the former **Myrtle's Warbler** as the single species now known as **Yellow Rumped Warbler**.

Including Audubon, these 7 ornithologists/naturalists/artists thus give us names for 22 ABA species. All of the Pallas species are rarities from Eurasia found almost exclusively in remote areas of Alaska. The same is true for the **Steller's Sea Eagle**. At first, I could not find any Ebird ABA area record for the **Townsend's Storm Petrel** which generally occurs in Pacific waters off Central America but learned it has been seen on some San Diego pelagic trips. It was a split from Leach's Storm Petrel. Excluding those five very rare species, after my trip to North Carolina, I have now been very fortunate to have seen and photographed all 20 remaining species – all of them in 2018. It just turned out that way as I was chasing other targets – but a fun outcome. The remainder of this blog shares some information about the people who gave their names to these species and includes my sighting records and photos for the year.

John Cassin (1813 – 1869)



A noted taxonomist who among other things named 198 species not previously described by Audubon and Wilson. He served as Curator of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences. All of the birds named after him were found in the West, his major area of focus but one he never visited.

Cassin's Auklet – Westport Pelagic, Washington March 17



Cassin's Sparrow – King Ranch April 6



Cassin's Finch – Texas and Washington April 13



Cassin's Kingbird – Ramona, California, February 28



Cassin's Vireo – Bullfrog Pond, Washington May 8



Alexander Wilson (1766-1813)



Regarded as the founder of American Ornithology due to his pioneering American Ornithology – a 9 Volume set published between 1808 and 1814 (the last volume posthumously). His work encouraged John James Audubon.

Wilson's Warbler – Scriber Lake Park, Washington May 21

Wilson's Storm Petrel – Hatteras, N.C. Pelagic June 1

Wilson's Snipe – Ridgefield NWR, Washington January 7

Wilson's Plover – Tule Lake, Corpus Christi, Texas April 2

Wilson's Phalarope – County Line Ponds (Grant), Washington May 19

William Swainson (1789 – 1855)



An English ornithologist, entomologist, conchologist, natural historian, and a gifted illustrator of the natural world. He was a pioneer of the new lithographic technology, which enabled quicker reproduction of his work than engraving.

Swainson's Warbler – Columbia, N.C. June 4



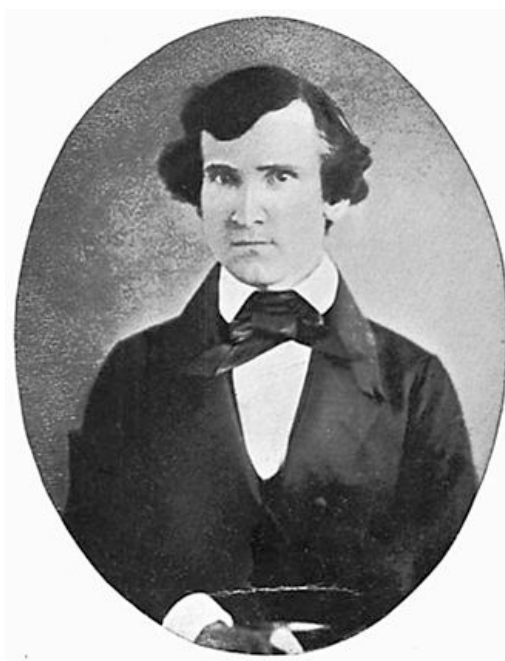
Swainson's Thrush – Whitehorse Centennial Trail, Washington June 7



Swainson's Hawk – Kittitas, Washington April 19



John Kirk Townsend (1809- 1851)



A naturalist, ornithologist and collector who accompanied Thomas Nuttall on a Western expedition where Townsend, better known for the many mammals he found and were named after him, also collected many new bird species including **Vaux's Swift**, **Sage Thrasher**, **Mountain Plover** and **the Townsend's Warbler** sending many to John James Audubon. An unfortunate note: he died of arsenic poisoning – the secret ingredient used in his taxidermy preparations.

Townsend's Warbler – Edmonds, Washington January 8



Townsend's Solitaire – Camano Island, Washington January 21



Townsend's Storm Petrel (Photo from the Internet – I have not seen one and definitely could not ID it)). It is a recent split from Leach's Storm Petrel. I hope to see one in San Diego in August.



Georg Steller (1709 -1746)



A German botanist, zoologist, physician and explorer, who worked in Russia and is considered a pioneer of Alaskan natural history from his work in the North Pacific. In addition to the three avian species, the well known **Steller's Sea Lion** is named after him.

Steller's Eider (Female) – Seaside Cove, Oregon January 28



Steller's Jay – Bow, Washington, January 1



Steller's Sea Eagle – (I have not seen this species – maybe someday in Alaska)



Peter Simon Pallas (1741 – 1811)



A native German naturalist, he is remembered mostly for his research occurred during the Siberian Expedition in 1768 arranged by Catherine the Great, ruler of the Russian Empire, where he lived thereafter. He worked extensively in far eastern Russia. I have not seen any of the species bearing his name and all photos are from the internet.

Pallas's Rosefinch



Pallas's Bunting

Pallas's Leaf Warbler

John James Audubon (1785-1851)

The most well known and prolific of the early naturalists and illustrators. He is best known for his paintings found in his seminal *Birds of America*, a collection of 435 life-size and most importantly life-like prints an American art classic. Like most of the others mentioned in this blog, he lived in Pennsylvania where he is said to have conducted the first known bird-banding experiment in North America, tying strings around the legs of **Eastern Phoebes** learning that they returned to the same nesting sites each year. He traveled extensively in the eastern and southern U.S. collecting specimens and he collaborated with many other naturalist collectors of the period. I am including the “former” Audubon’s Warbler as his third eponymous species because it would be wrong to not have Audubon on this list (and I am still hoping they return to that name).

Audubon’s Shearwaters – Hatteras, N.C. Pelagic June 1

Audubon's Oriole – King Ranch, Texas April 6

Audubon's Warbler – South Padre Island, Texas April 8

All of these birds and all of these naturalists/ornithologists were from such a very different time in history. No cameras, so collecting meant shooting specimens and studying them feather by feather. That is still done today, of course and there is no substitute for having a bird in hand, but in our digital world, how nice to have our apps, cameras, phones etc. How nice too to be able to fly to – wherever – rather than the long, arduous, dangerous and sometimes even fatal adventures taken over land and sea by these pioneers. Birding offers so many areas of interest. I enjoyed this brief departure from sometimes blow by blow descriptions of my own trips and observations. It was nice to have this historical framework for these experiences.

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