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## The Birdist's Rules of Birding

# Birdist Rule #101: Learn About the People Certain Birds Are Named After

*Like this Cooper's Hawk. Know who it was named for? Didn't think so.*



By **Nicholas Lund**

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### Birds in This Story



Wilson's Phalarope

*Phalaropus tricolor*



Clark's Nutcracker

*Nucifraga columbiana*

Williamson's Sapsucker

*Sphyrapicus thyroideus*

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There is no higher honor on Earth, in my opinion, than having a species named after you. Each individual human life is just a blip on the

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Cooper's Hawk. Photo: Jim Burns/Audubon Photography Awards

evolutionary timeline, and so somehow hitching your name to the common name of some living species means you'll be remembered forever. It's immortality. Sort of.

It's also pretty much over with. While scientists are discovering new species all the time, very few of them are widespread enough to even get a common name (as opposed to a binomial, or Latin, name), let alone a common name that commemorates someone else (called an "eponym"). The vast majority of our American birds got their common names more than a century ago, and so any of us living now will have a hard time getting a species named after us unless we start making some changes. (Which we should, but I'll get into that later.)

But immortality only works if people actually remember who you are. Birders talk about birds named for people all the time, but do we actually know anything about the people behind them? Most of us don't, so let me help.

Quickly, no column like this should be written without acknowledging a debt to the definitive tome on the subject, *Whose Bird?*, by Bo "Fat Birder" Beolens and Michael Watkins. It's a great addition to any birder's library, if you can find a copy. OK, let's get going.

**William Cooper (1798–1864): Cooper's Hawk.** By my count, the Cooper's Hawk is this country's most frequently seen eponymous bird. William Cooper was part of a group of naturalists working in the early 19th century, a time when many American species were first being formally described and given common names. As you'll see, it was common for these naturalists to name new species for each other.

Cooper was one of the founders of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, and he was most famous not for his bird studies but for being a conchologist, a very fun word meaning that he studied mollusk shells. He was no ornithological slouch, though, being the man who first described the beautiful Evening Grosbeak. Cooper was honored with the hawk by a contemporary of his, a man with a famous pedigree and some birds named after him too:



Bonaparte's Gull. Photo: Peggy Scanlan/Audubon Photography Awards

**Prince Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803–1857): Bonaparte's Gull.** Prince Charles Lucien Bonaparte, born Jules Laurent Lucien, was the nephew of the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Young Jules took after his uncle, but instead of conquering territory, he conquered the world of ornithology. The guy was so good that he started discovering American species before he even got here: He collected the first specimen of the bird that would later become known as the Wilson's Storm-Petrel on his first voyage from Antwerp to New York.

Bonaparte spent a lot of time in the United States but had much broader interests. He eventually returned home to Paris and started working on a catalogue of every bird species known in the world at the time, the **Conspectus Generum Avium**. Although he died before it was complete, the work was a major ornithological landmark. But let's return for a moment to that Wilson's Storm-Petrel, an eponymous species named for an even more famous ornithologist than Bonaparte:

**Alexander Wilson (1766–1813): Wilson’s Warbler, Wilson’s Storm-Petrel, Wilson’s Snipe, Wilson’s Phalarope, Wilson’s Plover.** The man who became known as the Father of American Ornithology was actually born in Scotland and lived as a poet, of all things. He came to the United States in 1794 after being arrested for writing a satirical poem about a . . . local mill owner. What scandal! He set up shop in Pennsylvania, working as a schoolmaster while getting to work writing and illustrating all the known birds in the new nation for what became the massive *American Ornithology*.

Wilson's Warbler. Photo: Heather Roskelley/Audubon Photography Awards

The man and his work were hugely influential, resulting in a number of species named in his honor. He even discovered one of these himself, but contrary to rumor, he didn't name it for himself. When he described the bird that we now call Wilson's Warbler back in 1811, he didn't call it “Wilson's”, and he didn't even call it a warbler: It was listed in his *American Ornithology* as the “Green Black-capt Flycatcher.” Understanding of bird families was still pretty shaky in those days.

Birds weren't only named in honor of famous ornithologists, but also for explorers, soldiers, and other people who collected a species for the first time. **John Porter McCown** (1815–1879) was a former Major-General in the Confederate Army who shot an odd bird on the grasslands near his home and was later commemorated with the McCown's Longspur. **Lieutenant Robert Stockton Williamson** (1825–1882) was surveying northern California when his team discovered the colorful woodpecker that would become known as Williamson's Sapsucker. Another woodpecker, Lewis' Woodpecker, was named in honor of that famous western explorer **Meriwether Lewis** (1774–1809), who first collected it in 1805 in Montana. Not to be left out, his partner, **William Clark** (1770–1838), was honored with the Clark's Nutcracker by the aforementioned Alexander Wilson.

Anna's Hummingbird. Photo: Rick Derevan/Audubon Photography Awards

Unfortunately, the vast majority of eponymous birds are named after men, who were doing most of the exploring and ornitholog-ing (just roll with it) and describing at the time. There are some exceptions, though. Anna's Hummingbird is named for **Princess Anna D'Essling, Duchess of Rivoli** (1802–1887), whose husband had the first specimen in his collection. Lucy's Warbler was named after **Lucy Hunter Baird** (1848–1913), the daughter of famous ornithologist **Spencer Fullerton Baird** (1823–1887), who has a few American birds named after him, including a sparrow and a sandpiper. The Mountain

Chickadee was named Bailey's Chickadee in 1908 in honor of **Florence Augusta Merriam Bailey** (1863–1948), but the name didn't catch on.

Let's take a second to talk about Bailey. A resident of the District of Columbia, she was an impressive ornithologist with a significant resume. Her book *Birds through an Opera Glass* is widely considered to have been the first field guide to birds, and she was the first woman to become a member of the American Ornithologists' Union. Later, she became the first woman to be elected a Fellow of the union and the first to receive its prestigious Brewster Medal. She was also a vocal opponent of the use of bird feathers for hats, the movement that gave rise to the Audubon Society.

There are lots of female ornithologists worthy of having a species named after them. In fact, there are many people—men and women—worthy of having a species named after them but unlucky enough not to be living in the early 1800s. Florence Augusta Merriam Bailey is one of them. So is Phoebe Snetsinger. And Roger Tory Peterson. And Theodore Roosevelt. Why should avian immortality be so limited?

I've got a solution. As I'm sure you already noticed, there are quite a few people with multiple American species named after them. Alexander Wilson has five. Baird's got two. **John Cassin** (1813–1869) has five. **John Kirk Townsend** (1809–1851) has two. **John James Audubon** (1785–1851) was honored not only with two species, a shearwater and an oriole, but also the best dang bird protection organization in the world!

I humbly suggest that the American birding community start looking at swapping out some of the common names of species to honor other folks. Those with multiple eponymous species will get to keep one, freeing the others up for more contemporary honorees. Let's start easy, with Nick Lund.

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Fun article- but we should probably spell Ms. Snetsinger's name correctly before naming something after her.

But how great would it be to have a bird named after a woman who was named after a bird?!

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