

The Black-eared Catbird, catbird taxonomy, and the contemporary proliferation of bird species

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Abstract

The recent use of the common name of Spotted Catbird for what was originally described only as *Ailuroedus melanotis* is incorrect from the historic, scientific, and vernacular name point of view. The literal translation of *melanotis* is "black-eared" and the scientific name *A. melanotis* was that logically applied when the species was described. It was then referred to as the Black-cheeked or Black-eared Catbird in foundation literature and the latter name persisted until changed without justification to Spotted Catbird. The species is extensively distributed across New Guinea, where it is called Black-eared Catbird, with but a tiny north-eastern Queensland distribution in Australia. Black-eared Catbird is more informative and helpful given that this species is no more spotted than other catbirds and that there is a White-eared Catbird *A. buccoides* in New Guinea. Black-eared Catbird was applied as the vernacular name for *A. melanotis* in recent authoritative literature about the bowerbird family, the Australasian avifauna and particularly New Guinea, and world bird listings, and should be used so long as the taxon is *A. melanotis*. A recent genetics-based study resulted in systematists elevating most catbird subspecies to species that are morphologically so similar as to be all-but unidentifiable in the field. The similarly genetics-based elevation of some bird of paradise subspecies results in species that appear identical in the wild. Perhaps there is a need to address the practicality of such species in view of their detrimental consequences for ornithology, bird watching, and field guides.

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Introduction

The newly published *The Australian Bird Guide* (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017) is an admirable comprehensive work. I was delighted to see the bowerbird family (Ptilonorhynchidae) account reads "Tooth-billed Bowerbird clears a courtship court instead (not a bower, as it does not involve construction)" (cf. Frith 2016, 2017; Harrington 2017): but I digress. A blemish in this new guide is the use of Spotted Catbird for what is the Black-eared Catbird (cf. Frith & Frith 2004, pp. 235-6 and references therein, and subsequent authoritative literature [see below]); a species confined within Australia to tropical north Queensland. There are doubtless

many vernacular bird names that individuals disagree with but this specific case is well documented and is demonstrably inappropriate and erroneous. This catbird's scientific name is *Ailuroedus melanotis* (Gray 1858, p. 181); *Ailuroedus* translating to "cat-singer" and *melanotis* to "black-eared" (Jobling 2010). Black-cheeked or Black-eared Catbird was applied to *A. melanotis* in a foundational Australian avifaunal work (Gould & Sharpe 1875-88) and in early monographs (Elliot 1873; Sharpe 1891-98). Iredale (1948, 1950, 1956) used Black-eared Cat-bird (sic.) in his list of the bowerbirds, his monograph on the family, and his

work on New Guinea birds. All contemporary works on New Guinea birds use Black-eared Catbird (see below) for what is primarily a New Guinea species. A conspicuous black "ear" covert patch is common to all Black-eared Catbird subspecies, past and present, in conspicuous contrast to the white ear covert patch on all subspecies of the White-eared Catbird.

Authors of *The Australian Bird Guide* rigidly follow certain guidelines in attributing vernacular names, of which they write "In this book we have followed the species level taxonomy of IOC version 5.4 (Gill & Donsker 2017). However, *in the interests of stability*, English names follow the Birdlife Australia Working List of Australian Birds (version 2). Except for recent additions to the Australian list, and in cases where taxonomic changes have necessitated new names, these English names were recommended in the 1970s by the Recommended English Names Committee of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (now BirdLife Australia) (RAOU 1978 [alternatively Schodde *et al.* 1978]): *the great majority have been reassuringly stable ever since.*" (Menkhorst *et al.* 2017, p. 2; italic emphasis being mine). Schodde *et al.* (1978) stated that "For species that range beyond Australia, the name most widely or authoritatively used internationally is preferable" but this was inexplicably not applied to the Black-eared Catbird, being included as Spotted Catbird. The introduction of Spotted Catbird without justification (e.g. Mathews 1930; Gilliard 1969; RAOU 1978; BirdLife Australia 2016) was *not in the interests of stability* and, as a result, the name of *A. melanotis* has *certainly not been reassuringly stable ever since* (see Frith & Frith 2004, pp. 235-6; and below).

While a few authors have used Green or Spotted for *A. melanotis* in New Guinea those of more significant recent publications use Black-eared Catbird (e.g. Iredale 1950, 1956; Gilliard & LeCroy 1970; Peckover & Filewood 1978; Beehler 1978; Diamond 1985). Even more recent major works on New Guinea birds use Black-eared, including contemporary standard avifaunal works (Pratt & Beehler 2015; Beehler & Pratt 2016; Gregory 2017), those on the bowerbird family (Frith & Frith 2004, 2008, 2009; Ottaviani 2014), and the latest attempts to standardise vernacular world bird names (e. g. Gill & Donsker 2016; del Hoyo & Collar 2016).

Catbird taxonomy and its popular nomenclatural implications

While catbirds have mostly constituted three species over the past 25 years, the Black-eared has been treated by some authors as a subspecies of the Green Catbird (e.g. Marshall 1954; Rand & Gilliard 1967; CSIRO 1969; Diamond 1972; Coates 1990; Schodde & Mason 1999). Thus, some works dealing with Australia acknowledged only the Green Catbird *A. crassirostris* occurring there. This resulted in some confusing nomenclature: e.g. Spotted being applied to *A. crassirostris maculosus* and Green Catbird to *A. c. crassirostris* (Storr 1973, pp. 142-3).

A recent revision of all three long acknowledged catbird species, based upon "mitochondrial and nuclear DNA within a spatio-temporal framework" complicates matters. It consistently refers to the "Black-eared Catbird *Ailuroedus melanotis*" or the "Black-eared Catbird complex" (Irestedt *et al.* 2016) and while this suggests its authors prefer that name they conclude by elevating several Black-eared Catbird subspecies to species. This results in six species from within the "Black-eared Catbird complex", of what was at least nine or 10 subspecies (*cf.* Gilliard 1969; Cooper & Forshaw 1977; Frith & Frith 2004, 2009; Higgins *et al.* 2006). They apply Spotted Catbird to their resurrected species *A. maculosus*, as it was originally scientifically (but not vernacularly) named (Ramsay 1875) prior to it being reduced to a subspecies of *A. melanotis*. The name *maculosus* translates to "spotted", and this is perhaps why Spotted was used rather than the long-standing Black-eared Catbird. Some earlier authors also applied Spotted Catbird correctly, in doing so for the taxon *A. maculosus* (e.g. Campbell 1901; North 1902; Lucas & Le Souëf 1911), in seeing it as a species.

In splitting the three or four subspecies of White-eared Catbird (Beehler & Pratt 2016; Frith & Frith 2004, 2009; respectively) into three species, Irestedt *et al.* (2016) apply the cumbersome vernacular names of Vogelkop White-eared Catbird *A. buccoides*, Southern White-eared Catbird *A. stonii*, and Northern White-eared Catbird *A. geislerorum*; reflecting their geographical distributions. For their six species of the "Black-eared Catbird complex" (Beehler & Pratt 2016 acknowledge six subspecies in New Guinea; with two more in Australia) they contradict this

approach by using Grey-throated Catbird *A. maculosus*, Back-capped Catbird *A. melanocephalus*, Huon Catbird *A. astigmaticus*, Arfak Catbird *A. arfakianus*, Northern Catbird *A. jobiensis* and Spotted Catbird *A. melanotis*. While Gregory (2017, p. 228) applies the first five of these names to subspecies of *A. melanotis* he retains Black-eared Catbird for the species. In keeping with their geographical vernacular names for the White-eared Catbird complex, Irestedt *et al.* (2016) could have used the logically consistent Southern Catbird for *A. maculosus*, Eastern Catbird for *A. melanocephalus*, and perhaps Lowland Catbird for *A. melanotis* (these common names being redundant should the elevation of subspecies be rejected). The suggested elevation of bird of paradise subspecies including, for example, the Trumpet Manucode *Phonygammus keraudrenii* into some nine species (*cf.* Cracraft's 1992 phylogenetic species concept), was rejected (but see below). Eminent ornithologist David Snow pointed out that the logical extension of Cracraft's species concept would result in an estimated > 20,000 bird species (Snow 1997), if not significantly more.

The *Clements Checklist of Birds of the World* (Clements 2016) follows the elevation of Black-eared Catbird subspecies to the species and vernacular names of Irestedt *et al.* (2016) except it uses the correct vernacular of Spotted, rather than Grey-throated, Catbird for *A. maculosus* and Black-eared, rather than Spotted, Catbird for *A. melanotis*.

The proliferation of morphologically similar species

The elevation of long and widely accepted subspecies to species results in the impracticable circumstance of multiple near-identical species that cannot be meaningfully illustrated or identified in the wild. The elevation of subspecies to species thus involves, in the bowerbirds and birds of paradise at least, changing useful species to impractical ones for field ornithology. Anyone performing avifaunal surveys in New Guinea seeing catbirds with a dark crown spotted with pale buff or white and black ear coverts would have no problem having their records accepted for the Black-eared Catbird. If, however, there are six very similar black-eared catbird species their sight records could not be attributed to any one with

confidence, most geographical locations notwithstanding because the extent of the ranges of the various populations are inadequately known (Frith & Frith 2004, p. 234). To survey such split catbird species blood samples would have to be obtained and analysed. Hardly a practical proposition, and one that suggests that the species involved are not practical or helpful for ornithology notwithstanding academic interest in them (Snow 1997, p. 119). This would also be true of three split white-eared catbird species; and possibility up to seven Macgregor's Bowerbird, and two Archbold's, Satin, Lauterbach's, Western, and Great Bowerbird "species". Within the birds of paradise, the number of similarly impractical species would be higher; not to mention those of other avian families. I received a copy of a paper (TK Pratt *in litt.* 8 July 2017) in which the Superb Bird of Paradise is split into three species on genetic and other evidence (Irestedt *et al.* 2017). Graphically emphasising and demonstrating the impracticality of such morphologically similar, if not identical, elevated species is the fact that identical or imperceptibly slightly different colour figures are used to illustrate the Trumpet Manucode forms *Phonygammus k. keraudrenii* and *P. k. purpureo-violaceus*, the adult male plumage of the Superb Bird of Paradise forms *Lophorina s. superba* and *L. s. latipennis*, the adult male and adult female of both the Magnificent *Ptiloris magnificus* and Growling *P. intercedens* Riflebirds in del Hoyo & Collar (2016) and Gregory (2017), and for the latter two species in Pratt & Beehler (2015).

An estimate published last year suggests that the number of world bird species would more than double were bird taxonomists to adopt the relatively recent Phylogenetic Species Concept (Barrowclough *et al.* 2016).

Summary and conclusion

Conspicuous exceptions to guidelines for vernacular bird names in any taxonomic listing must surely be acknowledged, considered, and acted upon when required; particularly in instances where the name contradicts long standing, correct, logical usage (and is thus in conflict with stated guideline aims). The Black-eared Catbird case is such an exception. That the name of that bowerbird was initially *Ailuroedus melanotis* and the highly appropriate Black-cheeked or Black-eared Catbird indicates that the change to Spotted

Catbird was not in the interests of stability. The use of Spotted Catbird is not only inappropriate from every point of view it is colloquially Australian (unless applied only to *A. m. maculosus*), because the range of it beyond Australia is some ten times that within Australia. This catbird is no more spotted than its congeners, save on its crown (Spotted-crowned or Spotted-capped Catbird having never been suggested), and Black-eared is more informatively helpful given that *A. buccoides* of New Guinea is the White-eared Catbird (Frith & Frith 2004; Figs. 1-4). That contemporary literature on New Guinea birds and publications seeking to standardise world bird names consistently use Black-eared Catbird is pertinent.

Only should the splitting of the Black-eared Catbird complex into six species (*cf.* Irestedt *et al.* 2016) be widely established over a significant period could the name Spotted Catbird be applied — but then only to *A. maculosus*. If the species remains *A. melanotis* the correct name is Black-eared Catbird. It was only because the subspecies *A. melanotis maculosus* was long ago considered by some a species that Spotted Catbird was ever applied. As current widespread opinion is that *maculosus* is a subspecies of *A. melanotis*, Spotted Catbird is inappropriate; Black-eared Catbird being

the correct and established name. There is nothing helpful in persisting with patently erroneous and inappropriate names for the sake of supposed stability. Doing so is contrary to that aim. The prompt acceptance of ten *Ailuroedus* catbird species by the well-intentioned people producing the IOC and Clements world bird lists may prove precipitous; and that decision will hopefully be kept under review considering the above facts and future usage. Academic interest in avian genetic diversity and taxonomy by professional systematists notwithstanding, consideration must surely be given to the practical application and use of numerous near-identical species to ornithologists, bird watchers, and authors of popular bird books and field guides. In the words of Stephen Garnett and Les Christidis "The taxonomists driving such changes are not accountable to anyone other than their academic peers. And peer review provides few constraints. Reviewers of taxonomic papers tend to comment on the techniques used to evaluate organisms, rather than on definitions. In short, other stakeholders have no objective criteria against which to argue the case for a different outcome and no globally recognized avenue for appeal" (Garnett & Christidis 2017).



Figure 1. An adult Black-eared Catbird, Topaz, Atherton Tableland, north Queensland. All photographs are by and copyright of Clifford B. Frith.



Figure 2. An adult Green Catbird, captive at Rainforest Habitat, Port Douglas, north Queensland.



Figure 3. An adult White-eared Catbird, captive at Baiyer River Sanctuary, Papua New Guinea.



Figure 4. An adult male Spotted Bowerbird, south of Charters Towers, north Queensland.

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