

# Dena'ina names for birds of the Kenai Peninsula

by John Morton



*Surf scoters (English) or the one with a light color on its nose (Dena'ina) flush from Bottenintnin Lake on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (credit: Mika Morton, Soldotna).*

With a modest grant from the National Geographic Society, I spent a few months living with the Cofan Indians in the late 1980s studying white-lipped peccaries along the Rio Aguarico in Ecuador. I remember asking Randy Borman, the multilingual son of the first missionaries to work with the Cofan, what made Cofan different than other neighboring tribes like the Quechuans (formerly the Incans). His response, echoed by many professional anthropologists, was “if you speak Cofan, you are Cofan.”

Language, and more specifically what you name something, tells a lot about how you interact with the world around you. Joseph Robertia, a writer for our other local newspaper, once passed on an interesting tidbit that Native Americans tended to name wildlife after behavior rather than what the critter looked like. I filed this idea away until I recently ran into a book entitled “Bird Traditions of the Lime Village Area Dena'ina: Upper Stony River Ethno-Ornithology”. Here was a chance to test this idea.

I extracted 70 bird species from all taxa which the authors had been able to determine full Dena'ina names and were also found on the Kenai Peninsula. I classified their names, both Dena'ina and their common English equivalent (determined by the American Ornithologists' Union), into categories based on behavior, call or sound, habitat, physical attributes, and none-of-the-above.

Sure enough, 50 percent (35 species) of the English equivalents are based on physical attributes, birds like black-capped chickadee and spotted sandpiper. The next biggest English-based group is “none-of-the-above”, which includes 18 species with names that reflect a strong cultural bias (Lincoln's sparrow, American widgeon) or are simply not descriptive unless you know something about bird taxonomy (brant, whimbrel, northern harrier). There are only four species' names based on behavior (and only partly so) such as American dipper and olive-sided flycatcher, and only three based on sound (mew gull).

In contrast, 53 percent of Dena'ina names are based on behavior (22 species) and sound (15 species). So the cliff swallow is one that daubs mud, the olive-sided flycatcher is one that says “dry fish” (in Dena'ina), the ruffed grouse is the one that pounds, the osprey becomes one that watches the water, and the northern hawk owl is one that sits on branches whereas the boreal owl is one that stays under trees. The savannah sparrow is the “ground squirrel that goes ch'ich (scraping noise)”, an appellation that the authors speculated may have come about because this bird is found in open alpine areas where Lime Villagers harvested ground squirrels.

Only 26 of Dena'ina names are based on physical attributes. The three scoter species are great examples when translated: one with a light color on its nose (surf scoter), one with yellow-orange on its nose (black scoter), and one with light-colored eyes (white-winged scoter). There are also associations based on physical similarities – although red-necked phalaropes and red-necked grebes are not taxonomically related, the Dena'ina called the former the younger brother of the latter.

Some birds share the same habitat both in English and Dena'ina. The spruce grouse in English becomes one that eats spruce boughs in Dena'ina. The bank swallow becomes beneath the bank. But the harlequin duck becomes “resident of the passes”, a more precise label for a waterfowl species that breeds along mountain streams.

A couple of birds get unique recognition by the Lime Villagers. The fox sparrow literally translates to

“why does it scold me?” and the white-tailed ptarmigan to “you are dreaming”.

I don't know exactly why Dena'ina may be more behaviorally attuned than those of European descent. Perhaps because binoculars and scopes are a great advantage for seeing, rather than hearing, birds in contemporary times. Perhaps because Dena'ina lived closer to the land in more recent times. Stephen Jay Gould, the great Harvard evolutionary biologist, wrote in an essay that while western and non-western cultures generally recognize species as similar organizational units, the increasing differences at higher levels (genus, family, order) involve their relative importance to humans rather than an evolutionary construct.

Many of the Old World names given to modern birds have etymological roots that may have been more meaningful prior to modern English. For instance, the harrier (or marsh hawk) likely derives from a mid-16th century use of “one that harries”, which describes behaviorally how the marsh hawk hunts for

nesting birds and small mammals low over the landscape. Similarly, whimbrel may have also originated in the 16th century as an alteration of “whimper”, which is what its call sounds like.

Anyway, my point is that if you knew birds by their Dena'ina names, you might understand something of what it means to be truly native to the Kenai Peninsula. The calls of the olive-sided flycatcher (vava nihi) and golden-crowned sparrow (tsik'ezdlagh) told the Lime Villagers that the salmon were making their way through the upper Kuskokwim River. Peter Kalifornsky, the last native-speaking Kenaitze, told a similar story of how the tsik'ezdlagh heralded the first salmon run in the spring on the Kenai Peninsula. It's a different way of relating to the natural world than looking at a sonar count online.

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