

What's in a name?



Aboriginal names are commonly used for many species of Western Australian plants and mammals, but it's a different story for birds in the south-west. An extensive search of historical sources by a WA scientist has uncovered thousands of records for numerous species and it is hoped at least some of these will be adopted by the scientific and wider community.

by Rhianna King

As the original human inhabitants of the land, Aboriginal people have an affinity for Western Australia's plants and animals that spans at least 60,000 years. They knew the behaviours and habits of animals and relied on them for food and to predict seasonal changes and events. While mammals are thought to have been the primary source of protein for Aboriginal people, birds and their eggs were an important component of their diets. Men hunted cockatoos and emus and women collected small species and eggs. Birds also featured extensively in Dreaming stories and other Aboriginal lore, and some bird species have significant cultural value, particularly in the south-west where Nyoongar people identify themselves with the maniyehmat (corella) or wordungmat (raven).

With more than 100 native languages spoken across WA there are numerous known, and probably many undocumented, Aboriginal names for birds. But, sadly, there are no Aboriginal names in use in the mainstream or scientific community for south-west WA species.

Name origins

Common names of most Australian birds were provided by early colonists and based on anglicised versions of Latin and Greek names. Or, as with the great brown kingfisher and the wattled bee-eater, they were likened, often incorrectly, to species found in



Britain and given a common name containing an adjective to distinguish them from their namesakes. While there are some well-known species that have Aboriginal names—such as wonga pigeon, boobook owl, kookaburra, currawong, brolga, gang-gang cockatoo, galah, corella and budgerigar—these names mostly originate from areas near Sydney or inland New South Wales. Aboriginal names have, however, become commonplace for some south-west mammals—such as chuditch, dibbler, mardo, boodie, woylie, tammar wallaby, numbat, quenda, quokka and woylie (see 'Ancient Animals, Ancient Names', *LANDSCOPE*, Summer 2001–02).

An interest in Aboriginal languages and a desire to pay homage to traditional knowledge propelled Department of Environment and Conservation senior principal research scientist Ian Abbott to undertake the massive task of synthesising historical records to compile a list of Aboriginal south-west bird names. From 1996 to 2009, as time permitted, Ian trawled through books, letters, diaries, reports and other documents written by explorers, historians and anthropologists, looking

for references to Aboriginal names. In total, he searched 91 sources and uncovered 3,200 records of Aboriginal names for 177 species. Ian used the records of nine ornithologists as the benchmark but opted to give primacy to the records of John Gilbert, who was instrumental in collecting WA species and who also had a keen interest in recording Aboriginal names.

Synthesising records

Gilbert collected birds during his two visits from March 1839 to March 1840 and July 1842 to December 1843 for John Gould's *Birds of Australia* project (see 'John Gilbert's Australian Collections', *LANDSCOPE*, Winter 1997). He had the opportunity to survey parts of WA before widespread colonisation had affected the abundance and distribution of Western Australian bird species. He was held in high regard by Gould and was a meticulous recorder of information. In fact, five documents detailing Aboriginal names for WA bird species, handwritten by Gilbert, still exist and detail 780 Aboriginal names for as many as 25 per cent of the birds known to exist in the south-west. In addition, he worked closely with Aboriginal people and was committed to collecting Aboriginal names, writing in 1839: "You will be pleased to hear that I have succeeded in getting Aboriginal names to nearly all my species" (John Gilbert 1839 in Whittell 1941: 127).



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Main Black swan—also known as koltjak, marli, wilar, wanar and woorotho—is one of the south-west's best-known species.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Text detail John Gilbert's hand-written notes from his visit to south-west WA in 1840.

Above Australian magpie or koorbat, koorbardi or koorbardo.

Photo – Sallyanne Cousans

Left The emu or wetj, wedji, kulya, kaya or yallibiri.

Photo – Daniella Van/Sallyanne Cousans Photography

Opposite page

Carnaby's cockatoo or ngolak, ngolyenok or ngoolya.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Names of conspicuous species

Scientific name	Common name	Aboriginal names [suggested pronunciation]
<i>Leipoa ocellata</i>	malleefowl	ngow [n'ow], ngowo [n'ow'awe]
<i>Cygnus atratus</i>	black swan	koltjak [call'jack], marli [mar'lee], wilar [wee'lar], wanar [war'nar], woorotho [woo'raw'thaw]
<i>Platycercus zonarius</i>	Australian ringneck	dowarn [dow'awn], doomolok [dorm'awe'lawk]
<i>Dromaius novaehollandiae</i>	emu	wetj [wetch], wedji [wet'chee], kulya [kool'ya], kaya [car'ya], yallibiri [yal'lee'bi'ree]
<i>Anas superciliosa</i>	Pacific black duck	yet [yet], ngoonana [n'oon'nar'nar], banji [ban'chee]
<i>Corvus coronoides</i>	Australian raven	wodang [wore'dang], kwokom [quor'corm], karlo [car'lau]
<i>Ardeotis australis</i>	Australian bustard	bebilya [be'bill'ya], kooli [koo'lee], wabanga [wa'bang'a], bibilerak [bib'ill'e'rack], barado [bar'a'daw]
<i>Aquila audax</i>	wedge-tailed eagle	woldja [woll'cha], warlitj [woll'itch], warlike [woll'ick], warbako [war'bar'co], yelka [yell'car]
<i>Cacatua pastinator</i>	western long-billed corella	manyt [mar'night], manatj [mar'natch], nganarra [n'are'nar'ra], binadjji [bee'nar'chee]
<i>Cracticus tibicen</i>	Australian magpie	koorbat [caw'bart], koorbardi [caw'bar'dee], koorbardo [caw, bar'daw]
<i>Pelecanus conspicillatus</i>	Australian pelican	nerimba [ne'rim'bar], boodelong [boo'de'lawng], ngooloomberri [n'ool'oom'berry]
<i>Strepera versicolor</i>	grey currawong	djilok [chee'lawk], bela [bell'are], bali [bar'lee], bil [beel], djabin [char-been]
<i>Calyptorhynchus baudinii</i> <i>latirostris</i>	Baudin's/Carnaby's cockatoo	ngolak [n'awe'lark], ngolyenok [n'ole'ye'nawk], ngoolya [n'ool'ya]
<i>Calyptorhynchus banksii</i>	red-tailed black cockatoo	karak [car'ark], dirandi [dee'ran'dee], yarbi [y'are'bee]

Names of rare and threatened species

Species name	Common name	Aboriginal names [suggested pronunciation]
<i>Pezoporus flaviventris</i>	western ground parrot	kyloring [ky'lore'ing], oorododi [bore'awn'daw'dee], djardonkori [char'dawn'caw'ree], djoobada [chore'ba'dar]
<i>Trichornis clamosus</i>	noisy scrub-bird	djimolok [chee'maw'lark]
<i>Dasyornis longirostris</i>	western bristlebird	booderitj [bore-de'rich], djidalya [chee'dal'ya]
<i>Psophodes nigrogularis</i>	western whipbird	dading [dar'ding]

Lost and found

Gilbert had the unique opportunity to collect Aboriginal names from Aboriginal people before widespread species extinction occurred and before European settlement disrupted Aboriginal society. As Aboriginal people then tended not to keep written records they relied on information being passed from generation to generation. Unfortunately, significant traditional knowledge has been lost due to population decline and displacement. In addition, the accuracy of some records is compromised because language boundaries were blurred by Aboriginal people moving around the country.

In working to capture and preserve this information, Ian uncovered reliable names for 132 of the 166 (80 per cent) terrestrial bird species that were breeding in the south-west at the time of European settlement, including more than 50 Aboriginal names for 14 of the region's most conspicuous species (see 'Names of

conspicuous species' above). These also included names for now rare and threatened species (see 'Names of rare and threatened species' above).

Collating these names is, hopefully, the first step in facilitating their inclusion in the scientific and wider community. Future steps must also include government departments and other bodies integrating the names into popular publications and other documents to ensure they become familiar to the general community and part of popular vernacular. Director of the Australian National Dictionary Centre and author of *Speaking our language: The story of Australian English* and *What's their story* Bruce Moore writes: "In Western Australia there has been a strong move to replace European names for flora and fauna with Indigenous names, and this is certainly a trend that will continue". Ideally, one day, we will look to the sky and comment on the raucous ngolyenok flying overhead, just as the traditional owners have for millennia.



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This article was based on Ian Abbott's paper 'Aboriginal names of bird species in south-west Western Australia, with suggestions for their adoption into common usage' published in Conservation Science (pages 213-278). This paper can be downloaded from DEC's website at www.dec.wa.gov.au.

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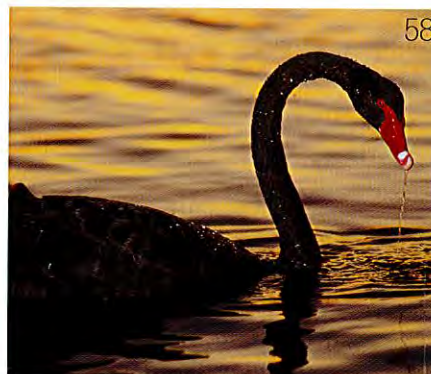
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