The proper pronunciation of bird names has long been the subject of argument and controversy. In fact, we had reached a point where if either of us heard the word PILL-ee-ate-ed again, we intended to inflict bodily harm on the speaker. We decided, therefore, to consult a selection of dictionaries and bird books to produce a standard reference article for the pronunciation of English bird names. Simple. Or so we thought.

Our initial research produced more questions than answers and left many of what we considered the most controversial pronunciations without a single, correct “standard.” Undaunted, we began to utilize other sources of information, primarily references to the etymology of the English language. Some of these sources proved helpful, but most raised even more questions. Nevertheless, we decided to establish our own standards by proclaiming a particular pronunciation, such as PIE-lee-ate-ed, correct while declaring all other pronunciations of that word incorrect.

Feeling quite proud and smug, we decided to have our work sanctified by the experts, in this case Merriam-Webster Incorporated, so that we might publish our standards with the blessings of authority.

Several weeks passed before the arrival of a communication
from Dr. David Justice, editor of pronunciation at Merriam-Webster, and in the interim, we confidently corrected our birding companions and led them on the path of virtuous speech. Expecting a letter brimming over with praise for our being such keen, astute scholars of common bird-name pronunciation, we opened the letter quickly and read it eagerly. Our confidence was replaced by disillusionment, and our pride went down in a gulp.

Dr. Justice stated that, to a large extent, correctness of pronunciation is simply the consensus of informed practice. So if you have half the birders saying FLAT-ee-at-ed, and half saying FLAT-ee-at-ed, there is no secure basis for declaring one half incorrect... One might try to fall back on the quantity of the vowel in the lender language, but the influence of classical vowel quantity has long since lapsed. It is observed that were we to honor classical quantity, we would pronounce agent, altem, and accent with a short stressed vowel, and cosmic and echo with a long one.

Humbled, yet enlightened, we changed the focus of our research to incorporate the “consensus of informed practice.” We discovered in the ensuing months of study that there exist many common bird names that may be correctly pronounced in more than one way, such as Osprey and Plover. Our goal of setting the birding world straight thus came to an end.

But do not misunderstand our effort: in a majority of instances, a consensus pronunciation, which can be verified etymologically (from a dictionary, for example) does exist for a given English bird name. Furthermore, merely because a majority of the birding populace pronounces a common bird name in a certain way, that pronunciation is not automatically deemed valid (e.g., jaçana). This is particularly true when the common name is a mispronounced surname.

So, here we present our findings for your consideration. Before you begin, a brief note about the method we have used to describe the pronunciation of a word. Basically we have used what is commonly known as the “moo-goo-gal-pun” method, where the phonetic pronunciation of a syllable is spelled out and where syllables are separated by dashes. The syllables on which the stress falls is capitalized (e.g., PLO-ver).

**ACCENTOR**

*ak-SEN-tor or AK-sen-tor* (e.g., Siberian Accentor)

- From the Latin ad “to” and cantor “singer,” which evolved to accentor, “one who sings with another.”

**ANI**

*AH-ner* (e.g., Smooth-billed Ani)

- Of Indian (Tupi-Guarani) origin, carried over into Spanish and Portuguese. It refers to any of several black cuckoos of the genus Cacomantis having a compressed blade-like bill.

**BAIKAL**

*by-KALL* (e.g., Baikal Teal)

- “Baikal” is the name of a lake in the Soviet Union. It is the deepest lake in the world—5,714 ft deep—and has a surface area of 3,200 sq mi.

**BECARD**

*BECK-erd or buh-KARD* (e.g., Rose-throated Becard)

- “Becard” is a French derivative meaning “large bill.”

**BENDIRE’S**

*BEN-dire’s* (e.g., Bendire’s Thrasher)

- Charles Emil Bendire (1836–1897) collected birds in the American West while serving as an officer in the U.S. Army. Dr. Elliot Coues named this species in Bendire’s honor.

**BERYLLINE**

*BAY-uh-line, BEAR-uh-line, or BEAR-uh-teen* (e.g., Berylline Hummingbird)

- “Berylline” is an adjective derived from the precious stone beryl, usually green, but also blue, rose, white, or golden, and both opaque and translucent.

**BEWICK’S**

*BAY-icks* (like the car) (e.g., Bewick’s Wren)

- Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) was an English author and wood engraver who wrote and illustrated a history of British birds. John James Audubon, a friend of his, named this wren after him.

**BOTTERI’S**

*BUT-er-eez* (e.g., Botteri’s Sparrow)

- Matteo Botteri (1807–1877) was a Yugoslavian immigrant who moved to Mexico in 1854. Dr. P. L. Sclater named this sparrow, first collected in southern Mexico, in his honor.

**CARACARA**

*KAR-ah-KAR-ah or KAR-uh-KAR-ah* (e.g., Crested Caracara)

- “Caracara” is a Tupi Indian word
carried over into Spanish and Portuguese. It is presumably imitative of the Caracara’s call.

CHACHALACA
CHAH-chah-LAH-kah (e.g., Plain Chachalaca)
“Chachalaca” is of Spanish-Mexican origin. The word describes the vocalization of the species.

COLIMA
koe-LEE-mah (e.g., Colima Warbler)
“Colima” refers to a small, prickly, tropical American shrub, a state on the Pacific Coast of south-western Mexico, and a volcano northwest of Colima in the state of Jalisco.

CRAVERI’S
kreh-VAIR-eez (e.g., Craveri’s Murrelet)
Craveri’s Murrelet, first collected by Dr. P. L. Selater off Baja California, was named by him in honor of Frederico Craveri (1815–1890).

CRISSAL
KRIS-uhl (e.g., Crissal Thrasher)
The word “crissal” is defined as relating to or having a crissum, the region surrounding the cloacal opening beneath the tail of a bird.

FALCATED
FAL-kay-tid (e.g., Falcated Teal)
“Falcated,” from Latin falx “sickle,” means hooked or curved like a sickle, and refers to the long, sickle-shaped tertials of the male Falcated Teal.

GLAUCOUS
GLAW-kuhs rhymes with raucoos (e.g., Glaucous-winged Gull)
“Glaucous” is derived from the Latin glaucus, and refers to a silvery, gray, or bluish-green color.

GOSHAWK
GAHSH-kuhk (e.g., Northern Goshawk)
“Goshawk” is derived from Old English goshafroc “goose hawk.”

GYRFALCON
GER-fal-kuhn (as in New Jersey) or GER-fal-kuhn (as in pal)
“Gyr” evolved from giri, an Old High German term which means “greedy,” i.e., greedy falcon.

JABIRU
jab-ee-ROO or jab-ee-ROO
“Jabiru” is a Tupi-Guarani Indian name for the bird.

JAÇANA
zah-sah-NAH (e.g., Northern Jaçana)
“Jaçana” comes through French, Spanish, and Portuguese transcriptions of the Tupi-Guarani name, which was pronounced zah-sah-NAH. A phonetic symbol known as the cedilla was used in the original spelling of the word. A cedilla (ç) is used in the French and Portuguese languages to distinguish the English “soft c” (the “s” sound) from the English “hard c” (the “k” sound). The proper (i.e., the original) pronunciation of the word is zah-sah-NAH, despite the multitudes who cry ja-KA-na. There are also those who say ja-KAH-na, a curious Spanish translation. In all fairness, it should be mentioned that much of the misunderstanding revolving around the proper pronunciation of jaçana has been propagated by popular reference books, such as A Field Guide to
Mexican Birds, wherein Peterson and Chalif have omitted the cedilla from the word "jacana." (Interestingly, they preserved the cedilla on araçai, pronounced are-ah-SAH-reh.) And the conflict does not stop here. The two standard checklists for North American birds present different forms of the name: the third edition of the ABA Checklist (1986) and the fifth edition of the AOU Check-list (1957) have a cedilla on jaçana, but the sixth edition of the AOU Check-list (1983) does not! Correspondence from Burt L. Monroe, Jr., chairman of the AOU Committee on Nomenclature and Classification, indicates that the reason for the omission of the cedilla by the AOU is that they "adopted a policy for English names similar to that in the International Code for scientific names: all diacritical marks and letters not part of the normal English alphabet are not used. This [also] applies to the Spanish tilde and acute accent, the glottal stops in Hawaiian names, etc." Throughout most of the English-speaking world, ornithologists pronounce the word dzhalah-KAN-ah or DZHALAH-KAN-ah (as in the names of the six African, Asian, and Australian species). So, zhalah-NAH, though correct, is becoming obsolete because almost no one says it that way anymore.

LAZULI

LAZH-uhi-lee or LAZ-uhi-lee (e.g., Lazuli Bunting)
"Lazuli" refers to the colors of Lazuli—an azure-blue mineral.

MURRE

MUK rhymes with tub (e.g., Common Murre)
"Murre" is of obscure origin. It may be related to murret or murrel, dialect English words used to refer to these species.

OLIVACEOUS

ahl-ih-vay-skius (e.g., Olivaceous Cormorant)
"Olivaceous" refers to a deep shade of green or olive.

OSPREY

ah-spay or AH-spay
The word "osprey" may have been derived from the Latin os-lilum meaning "bone-breaker," from os "bone" and frangere "to break."

PARULA

pa-ROO-la (not pa-ROO-la) (e.g., Tropical Parula)
"Parula" is a diminutive of parus "tit," hence meaning "little tit."

PAURAQUE

pa-RAH-kay
"Pauraque" is a Mexican-Indian word used to describe this species by its vocalization.

PILEATED

Pie-lait-ah-ed or PILL-ah-tied (e.g., Pileated Woodpecker)
"Pileated" refers to the curved shape of the crest that covers the pileum. Pileum is a variation of pileus, a felt skullcap worn by the ancient Romans and Greeks.

PLOVER

PLO-ver or PLO-ver (e.g., Mountain Plover)
The word "plover" has its origins in the Latin pluvia "rain," or pluvius "rainy."

POCHARD

POE-chord (e.g., Common Pochard)
No clear etymology is available. The best guesses are that the word is related to the old French word pocher, "to pocket" or "to poach," from the bird's popularity as game.

POMARINE

POE-mah-rine or PAH-mah-reen (e.g., Pomarine Jaeger)
"Pomarine" comes from the Greek pomon meaning "lilac" and rhinos meaning "nose."

PROTHONOTARY

pra-THON-ah-terry or pra-THON-ah-terry (e.g., Prothonotary Warbler)
A prothonotary was a chief clerk or official in certain courts of law. Prothonotary Warbler is so called because its coloration resembles that of the robes traditionally worn by prothonotaries.

PYRRHULOXIA

PEER-uh-loh-KAH-seh (e.g., Pyrrhuloxia) "Pyrrhuloxia" comes from the Greek pyrrhos meaning "red" or "fire," and loxos meaning "cross-bill."

SABINE'S

SAB-inz (e.g., Sabine's Gull)
Sir Edward Sabine (1788–1863), a British astronomer and physicist, named this gull that he collected in the Arctic in 1819 after his brother, Joseph. For reasons unknown to the authors, Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language (Unabridged) lists the pronunciation as SAY-bin, whereas all of the biographical accounts of Sir Edward Sabine that we consulted indicate that his name was pronounced SAB-in; hence SAB-inz Gull.

SCOPS
SCOPS (rhymes with drops) (e.g., Oriental Scops-Owl)
The term “scops” refers to an old English bard or poet.

SEMIPALMATED
SEM-e-PAH-mated or SEM-i-PAH-
mated (e.g., Semipalmated Sand-piper)
“Semipalmated” refers to the partial webbing, or palinations, between the toes.

SKUA
SKWah or SKOH-ah (e.g., South Polar Skua)
No clear etymology is available; however, skua is probably imitative of the bird’s cry, and it possibly originates from Scandinavian skuf, the Old Norse name for the bird.

SMEW
SMEW (rhymes with few)
The smallest merganser, its name is of uncertain origin, possibly a corruption of the Middle English word smear, “sea mew.”

TEMMINCK’S
TEM-minks (e.g., Temminck’s Stint)
Named after Conrad J. Temminck (1776–1858), a Dutch naturalist.

TYRANNULET
tie-RAN-you-let or tilh-RAN-you-let
(e.g., Northern Beardless-Tyrannulet)
“Tyrannulet” is derived from the Greek tyrannos, meaning “tyrant” or “lord,” indicating an absolute ruler. Hence: “small, small lord.”

VAUX’S
VAWKS-iz (e.g., Vaux’s Swift)
John K. Townsend named a swift he collected in the Pacific Northwest after his friend, William S. Vaux (1811–1882), member of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia.

ZENAIDA
zeh-NIE-dah (e.g., Zenaida Dove)
Named after Princess Zenaide Charlotte Julie Bonaparte, who was the eldest daughter of Joseph Bonaparte, King of Spain from 1808 to 1813.

Please note that this list is by no means complete; it is meant to be only a representative sample of what we felt to be some of the more commonly mispronounced bird names. Feel free to inform us of any you feel we neglected.

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Oxford English Dictionary. 1933.