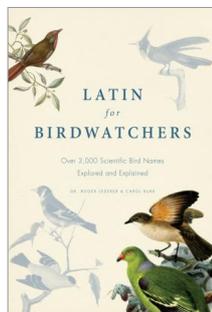


Excalfactoria and a bird and word book to keep you warm

BOOK TITLE:

Latin for birdwatchers

BOOK COVER:



AUTHORS:

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ISBN:

9781775840930

PUBLISHER:

Struik Nature, Cape Town, ZAR220

PUBLISHED:

2014

REVIEW TITLE:

Excalfactoria and a bird and word book to keep you warm

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HOW TO CITE:

Mitchell D. *Excalfactoria and a bird and word book to keep you warm*. S Afr J Sci. 2014;110(9/10), Art. #a0077, 1 page. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/sajs.2014/a0077>

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Chico, California, bordered by almond orchards and home to the US Yo-Yo Museum, seems an unlikely place to find an erudite husband-and-wife team who love birds, and words, and Latin. Roger Lederer and Carol Burr both have PhDs and both are Emeritus Professors at California State University, Chico – he of Biological Sciences and she of English. On his website, Lederer says he ‘knows exactly what birds you will find anywhere in the world’; he has travelled to over 100 countries. He has written five previous books on birds, and a 1984 textbook on *Ecology and Field Biology*. Burr is using her retirement from teaching English and Women’s Studies to paint and draw, in oils, water colours, pen and coloured pencils (the medium that she has used in illustrating *Latin for Birdwatchers*).

Latin for Birdwatchers sets out to explore and explain 3000 scientific bird names, listed alphabetically. It does not claim to be comprehensive: there are about 20 000 bird names. Those scientific names are the Linnaean binomial names, that is, the paired names of genus and species in the system set up by Carl Linnaeus (1707–1778) for naming everything alive. Although BirdLife South Africa works hard to promote the use of these names, birdwatchers tend to show less interest in Linnaean binomials than do, for example, tree watchers, but they are the only definitive names for birds (and trees). Most Linnaean binomials for birds are Latin-derived constructs, but enough, and especially those for African bird species, are Greek-derived to have justified ‘and Greek’ in the book’s title: *meleagris*, as in *Numida meleagris* (helmeted guineafowl) is the Greek word for guinea fowl and *Tyto*, as in *Tyto alba* (barn owl), the Greek word for owl. Some names are derived from other languages. *Pitta* – as in *Pitta angolensis* (African pitta) – is an Indian word meaning ‘little bird’. The *kori* in *Ardeotis kori* (kori bustard) comes from its Setswana name *kgōri*. For all the Linnaean binomials listed, the authors offer an easy-to-interpret pronunciation as if in post-Renaissance Latin, with the appropriate syllable emphasised: mel-ee-AH-gris and TI-to.

Most Linnaean binomials are descriptive of the bird’s biology, and for each of those listed the authors explain the derivation. To cover 3000 names, their explanations necessarily have to be brief, although they have expanded a few in boxes that they have called ‘Latin in action’ (Picus, after whom the woodpecker family Picidae was named, was a king in Roman mythology turned into a woodpecker by the witch Circe). Wildlife author Richard Conniff, who reviewed the book, otherwise favourably, in May 2014 for the *Wall Street Journal*, complained that some explanations were too brief to be satisfactory. (The US version that he reviewed was called *Latin for Bird Lovers*; South Africans apparently are allowed to ‘watch’ birds but not to ‘love’ them.) I did not find the explanations unsatisfactorily brief; they are more comprehensive, for example, than the explanations in the ‘big Roberts’, which, of course, admirably serves many purposes other than explaining binomials. Some Linnaean binomials are not descriptive but acknowledge a person associated with a species, and the person celebrated is identified in a phrase: Neergaard (‘recruiter for Witwatersrand mines’) of Neergaard’s sunbird *Cinnyris neergaardi* is recognised, as is Barlow (‘South African businessman’) of Barlow’s lark *Calendulauda barlowi* and Vigors (‘Irish secretary of the Zoological Society of London’) of the Karoo korhaan *Eupodotis vigorsii*, but not Stierling of Stierling’s wren-warbler *Calamonastes stierlingi* or Rüppell of Rüppell’s vulture *Gyps rueppellii*. Some Latin names are onomatopoeic: *Pitohui* as in *Pitohui dichrous* (hooded pitohui, a poisonous oriole-like bird from New Guinea) ‘is the sound made after a human tastes and immediately rejects the poisonous bird’, and *Tockus*, the hornbill genus, comes from ‘a Portuguese imitation of the bird’s call’. Here are some of the descriptive Latin names related to birds well known to South African birdwatchers: ‘*cista*, a wooden basket, and *colo*, dwell’, describing the nesting habits of cisticolas; *Ispidina* ‘from *hispidus*, rough, shaggy, hairy, as in *Ispidina picta*’ (African pigmy kingfisher); *Mirafra* in *Mirafra africana* (rufous-naped lark, called *Mirafra mirafra* in the book) from ‘*miras*, wonderful, and *afra*, African’; ‘*Musophaga*, from *musa*, banana, and *phagus*, eater of, as in *Musophaga rossae*’ (Ross’s turaco).

Just the list of Linnaean binomial names would have entertained me sufficiently, but that is not where Lederer and Burr left their book. They added two-page biosketches of 11 ‘famous birders’, including John Gould (1804–1881), after whom 24 bird species have been named (more than after anyone else), and the real James Bond (1900–1989), after whom Ian Fleming named 007. There are 20 one-page ‘genus profiles’, including the Laniidae, from *Lanius*, Latin for ‘butcher’, amongst which are the fiscals, from the Afrikaans *fiskaal*, meaning, according to Lederer and Burr, ‘a public official, particularly a hangman’. There are eight two-page essays on bird biology, containing interesting information that even experienced birdwatchers may not know. And then every page has one or more illustrations by Burr, attractively drawn not so much for ornithological accuracy but, as she herself said in an interview on Chico’s Northstate Public Radio, to try to capture the personality and aesthetics of the bird.

The book has been produced beautifully by Quid Publishing in the UK for Struik Nature. It has a textured hard cover, is a comfortable size, and is printed on elegant *fulvus* paper. I found some repetition in the grammar and a few typographical errors, which easily can be fixed in later editions, and do not intrude in this edition. If you like birds and words, and especially if you like Latin and Greek, read *Latin for Birdwatchers* cover to cover, or explore a favourite genus or historical ornithologist, or absorb a bird’s personality from an illustration, or just take a lucky dip. I do not think that the book will work well in electronic format. This is a book that you need to hold in your hands, to keep you warm. And I’ll leave it to you to discover why the king quail is called *Excalfactoria chinensis*.

Reference

1. Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG. Roberts birds of southern Africa. 7th ed. Cape Town: The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund; 2005.



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'How many for the book?' she would enquire with charming coyness. The patients caught the spirit of the thing, and those returning fair scores to the nurse did so with a proud ring in their voices but anyone making a duck confessed with shame and cowered under the bedclothes. The number of occasions was written in a separate square at the foot of the temperature chart. A nought was regarded by Sister as unpleasant, and more than two blank days she took as a personal insult. Treatment was simple. One nought was allowed to pass without punishment, but two automatically meant cascara, t