

# The First American Bird Checklist

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Towards the end of the Revolutionary War, the governors of the colonial states received a questionnaire from the French ambassador asking for a summary of the resources contained in their respective states. Only Thomas Jefferson responded producing his only published book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), which has provided posterity with a glimpse of the flora, fauna, minerals, geographic features, and political structure of late 18th-century Virginia. Included in this book is a simple list of 125 bird species he observed in Virginia. Since Jefferson provided neither a written description nor visual depiction of the birds, this list likely represents the first published checklist of birds for a locality in North America.

For any checklist to be truly useful, the popular names utilized by the list's author must equate to the understanding of the current user. "Most of us think of the various kinds of birds, certainly of the more familiar ones, in terms of the vernacular rather than in the garb of science. A Song Sparrow is a Song Sparrow more often than a *Melospiza melodia* as well to the ornithologist as to the untechnical wayfarer" (Trotter, 1909, p. 346). Thus, for those with an interest in ornithological history and a desire to glimpse a snapshot of the avifauna familiar to our third President, I have attempted to translate the popular names used by Jefferson in his *Notes* into names familiar to 21st-century birders.

While Jefferson, like modern checklist authors, did not provide drawings, paintings, or written descriptions to accompany his bird list, he did, for 97 of the species listed, provide a reference to scientific Linnaean or Catesby designations (Table 1). Thus, in order to decipher the identity of many of Jefferson's birds, one is compelled to examine the binomial designations used by Carl Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae* (1758) and the text and paintings produced by Mark Catesby in his seminal work, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands* (1731).

While the work of Linnaeus needs no explanation, the history of Catesby's book bears a brief mention. Catesby made two extended trips to America between 1712 and 1726. Primarily a botanist (as was Linnaeus), Catesby nevertheless included 109 illustrations of birds in his two-volume work, *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands*, which was published in England between 1731 and 1743. Linnaeus, who never traveled to America, relied in part on Catesby's work in the development of his system of specie classification (Stewart, 1997). Many (but not all) of Catesby's paintings were produced from observations made in the field as opposed to the carefully prepared skins utilized by his successors such as Alexander Wilson and John. J. Audubon. This may account for comments that "his colors are often too intense and little details such as tail-markings and wing-bars are omitted" (Stone, 1929). Jefferson was avid admirer of Catesby's work and relied upon it as evidenced by his use of Catesby's designations in *Notes*, though he too recognized flaws in Catesby's art — "His drawings are better as to form and attitude, than colouring, which is generally too high" (p. 192). Thus, some of the confusion in Jefferson's list may be partially explained by the lack of clarity in Catesby's work.

One writer in commenting on Jefferson's bird list stated that "it is a list of Catesby's North American birds, along with thirty-three additional birds that Jefferson himself listed, many of which are duplicates of the ones in Catesby's list... Thus, Jefferson's list has little, if any, importance, and should simply be thought of as Catesby's list reproduced with an addendum of some additional species" (Feduccia, 1985, p. 10). These observations fall short in three respects. First, logic dictates that Jefferson, an astute observer of the natural world, would not knowingly list a bird twice. Hence, where the popular names used by Jefferson appear to be attributable to the same species, one must investigate further in order to decipher Jefferson's likely intent. Simply stating that Jefferson  
*(text continues on page 20)*

**Table 1. Birds Listed in *Notes on the State of Virginia***

The Birds identified in Tables 1 and 2 are purposely listed in the order used by Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* and not in the order established by the American Ornithologists' Union *Check-list of North American Birds*. Additionally, the spelling and punctuation used by Jefferson is retained. For those birds identified with a "\*", the reader is advised to consult the text.

JEFFERSON'S POPULAR NAME	JEFFERSON'S LINNÆAN DESIGNATION	JEFFERSON'S CATESBY DESIGNATION	MODERN COMMON NAME
Tyrant; Field Martin	<i>Lanius tyrannus</i>	<i>Muscicapa corona rubra</i>	Eastern Kingbird
Turkey buzzard	<i>Vultur aura</i>	<i>Buteo specie GaHo-pavonis</i>	Turkey Vulture
Bald Eagle	<i>Falco leucocephalus</i>	<i>Aquila capite albo</i>	Bald Eagle
Little hawk; Sparrow hawk	<i>Falco sparverius</i>	<i>Accipiter minor</i>	American Kestrel
Pigeon hawk	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	<i>Accipiter palumbarius</i>	Merlin
Forked tail hawk	<i>Falco furcatus</i>	<i>Accipiter cauda furcata</i>	Swallow-tailed Kite
Fishing hawk		<i>Accipiter piscatorius</i>	Osprey
Little owl	<i>Strix asio</i>	<i>Noctua aurita minor</i>	Eastern-Screech Owl
Parrot of Carolina; Perroquet	<i>Psittacus Caroliniensis</i>	<i>Psitticus Caroliniensis</i>	Carolina Parakeet
Blue jay	<i>Corvus cristatus</i>	<i>Pica glandaria, cærulea cristata</i>	Blue Jay
Baltimore bird	<i>Oriolus Baltimore</i>	<i>Icterus ex aureo nigroque varius</i>	Baltimore Oriole
Bastard Baltimore	<i>Oriolus spurius</i>	<i>Icterus minor</i>	Orchard Oriole
Purple jackdaw; Crow blackbird	<i>Gracula quiscula</i>	<i>Monedula purpurea</i>	Common Grackle
Carolina cuckow	<i>Cuculus Americanus</i>	<i>Cuculus Caroliniensis</i>	Yellow-billed Cuckoo
White bill woodpecker	<i>Picus principalis</i>	<i>Picus maximus rostro albo</i>	Ivory-billed Woodpecker
Larger red-crested woodpecker	<i>Picus pileatus</i>	<i>Picus niger maximus, capite rubro</i>	Pileated Woodpecker
Red-headed woodpecker	<i>Picus erythrocephalus</i>	<i>Picus capite toto rubro</i>	Red-headed Woodpecker
Gold winged woodpecker; Yucker	<i>Picus auratus</i>	<i>Picus major alis aureis</i>	Northern Flicker
Red bellied woodpecker	<i>Picus Carolinus</i>	<i>Picus ventre rubro</i>	Red-bellied Woodpecker
Smallest spotted woodpecker	<i>Picus pubescens</i>	<i>Picus varius minimus</i>	Downy Woodpecker
Hairy woodpecker; Speck. woodpec.	<i>Picus villosus</i>	<i>Picus medius quasi-villosus</i>	Hairy Woodpecker
Yellow bellied woodpecker	<i>Picus varius</i>	<i>Picus varius minor ventre luteo</i>	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Nuthatch	<i>Sirra Europæa</i>	<i>Sitta capite nigro</i>	White-breasted Nuthatch
Small Nuthatch		<i>Sitta capite fusco</i>	Brown-headed Nuthatch
Kingfisher	<i>Alecedo alcyon</i>	<i>Ispida</i>	Belted Kingfisher

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**Birds Listed in Notes on the State of Virginia** (continued)

JEFFERSON'S POPULAR NAME	JEFFERSON'S LINNÆAN DESIGNATION	JEFFERSON'S CATESBY DESIGNATION	MODERN COMMON NAME
Pin Creeper	<i>Certhia pinus</i>	<i>Parus Americanus lutescens</i>	Pine Warbler *
Humming bird	<i>Trochilus colubris</i>	<i>Mellivora avis Caroliniensis</i>	Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Wild goose	<i>Anas Canadensis</i>	<i>Anser Canadensis</i>	Canada Goose
Buffel's head duck	<i>Anas bucephala</i>	<i>Anas minor purpureo capite</i>	Bufflehead *
Little brown duck	<i>Anas rustica</i>	<i>Anas minor ex albo &amp; fusco vario</i>	Bufflehead *
White face teal	<i>Anas discors</i>	<i>Querquedula Americana variegata</i>	Blue-winged Teal *
Blue wing teal	<i>Anas discors</i>	<i>Querquedula Americana fusca</i>	Blue-winged Teal *
Summer duck	<i>Anas sponsa</i>	<i>Anas Americanus cristatus elegans</i>	Wood Duck
Blue wing shoveler		<i>Anas Americanus lato rostro</i>	Northern Shoveler
Round crested duck	<i>Mergus cucullatus</i>	<i>Anas cristatus</i>	Hooded Merganser
Pied bill dopchick	<i>Colymbus podiceps</i>	<i>Prodicipes minor rostro vario</i>	Pied-billed Grebe
Largest crested heron	<i>Ardea Herodias</i>	<i>Ardea cristata maxima Americana</i>	Great Blue Heron
Crested bittern	<i>Ardea violacea</i>	<i>Ardea stellaris cristata Americana</i>	Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
Blue heron; Crane	<i>Ardea cærulea</i>	<i>Ardea cærulea</i>	Little Blue Heron
Small bittern	<i>Ardea virescens</i>	<i>Ardea stellaris minima</i>	Green Heron
Little white heron	<i>Ardea æquinotialis</i>	<i>Ardea alba minor Caroliniensis</i>	Snowy Egret *
Brown bittern; Indian hen		<i>Ardea stellaris Americana</i>	American Bittern *
Wood pelican	<i>Tantalus loculator</i>	<i>Pelicanus Americanus</i>	Wood Stork
White curlew	<i>Tantalus alber</i>	<i>Numenius albus</i>	White Ibis
Brown curlew	<i>Tantalus fuscus</i>	<i>Numenius fuscus</i>	White Ibis *
Chattering plover; Killdee	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>	<i>Pluvialis vociferus</i>	Killdeer
Oyster Catcher	<i>Hæmatopus ostralegus</i>	<i>Hælig; matopus</i>	American Oystercatcher
Soree; Ral-bird	<i>Rallus Virginianus</i>	<i>Gallinula Americana</i>	Virginia Rail *
Wild turkey	<i>Meleagris Gallopavo</i>	<i>Gallopavo Sylvestris</i>	Wild Turkey
American partridge; American quail	<i>Tetrao Virginianus</i>	<i>Perdix Sylvestris Virginiana</i>	Northern Bobwhite
Pheasant; Mountain partridge		<i>Urogallus minor, or a kind of Lagopus</i>	Greater Prairie Chicken *
Ground dove	<i>Columba passerina</i>	<i>Turtur minimus guttatus</i>	Common Ground-Dove
Pigeon of passage; Wild pigeon	<i>Columba migratoria</i>	<i>Palumbus migratorius</i>	Passenger Pigeon
Turtle; Turtle dove	<i>Columba Caroliniensis</i>	<i>Turtur Caroliniensis</i>	Mourning Dove

**Birds Listed in Notes on the State of Virginia** (continued)

JEFFERSON'S POPULAR NAME	JEFFERSON'S LINNÆAN DESIGNATION	JEFFERSON'S CATESBY DESIGNATION	MODERN COMMON NAME
Lark; Sky lark	<i>Alauda alpestris</i>	<i>Alauda guttore flavo</i>	Horned Lark
Field lark; Large lark	<i>Alauda magna</i>	<i>Alauda magna</i>	Eastern Meadowlark
Red winged starling; Marsh blackbird		<i>Stumus niger alis superne rubentibus</i>	Red-winged Blackbird
Fieldfare of Carolina; Robin redbreast	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>	<i>Turdus pilaris migratorius</i>	American Robin
Fox coloured thrush; Thrush	<i>Turdus rufus</i>	<i>Turdus ruffus</i>	Brown Thrasher
Mocking bird	<i>Turdus polyglottos</i>	<i>Turdus minor cinereo albus non maculatus</i>	Northern Mockingbird
Little thrush		<i>Turdus minimus</i>	*
Chatterer	<i>Ampelis garrulus</i>	<i>Garrulus Caroliniensis</i>	Cedar Waxwing
Red bird; Virginia nightingale	<i>Loxia Cardinalis</i>	<i>Coccothraustes rubra</i>	Northern Cardinal
Blue gross beak	<i>Loxia Cærulea</i>	<i>Coccothraustes cærulea</i>	Blue Grosbeak *
Snow bird	<i>Emberiza hyemalis</i>	<i>Passer nivalis</i>	Dark-eyed Junco
Rice bird	<i>Emberiza Oryzivora</i>	<i>Hormlanus Caroliniensis</i>	Bobolink
Painted finch	<i>Emberiza Ciris</i>	<i>Fringilla tricolor</i>	Painted Bunting
Blue gross beak	<i>Tanagra cyanea</i>	<i>Linaria cærulea</i>	Indigo Bunting *
Little sparrow		<i>Passerculus</i>	*
Cowpen bird		<i>Passer fuscus</i>	Brown-headed Cowbird
Towhe bird	<i>Fringilla erythrophthalma</i>	<i>Passer niger oculis rubris</i>	Eastern Towhee
American goldfinch; Lettuce bird	<i>Fringilla tristis</i>	<i>Carduehs Americanus</i>	American Goldfinch
Purple finch		<i>Fringilla purpurea</i>	Purple Finch
Crested Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa crinita</i>	<i>Muscicapa cristata ventre luteo</i>	Great-crested Flycatcher
Summer red bird	<i>Muscicapa rubra</i>	<i>Muscicapa rubra</i>	Summer Tanager
Red start	<i>Muscicapa ruticilla</i>	<i>Ruticilla Americana</i>	American Redstart
Cat bird	<i>Muscicapa Caroliniensis</i>	<i>Muscicapa vertice nigro</i>	Gray Catbird
Black-cap flycatcher		<i>Muscicapa nigrescens</i>	Eastern Phoebe *
Little brown flycatcher		<i>Muscicapa fusca</i>	Eastern Wood-Pewee*
Red-eyed flycatcher		<i>Muscicapa oculis rubris</i>	Red-eyed Vireo *
Blue bird	<i>Motacilla Sialis</i>	<i>Rubicula Americana cærulea</i>	Eastern Bluebird
Wren	<i>Motacilla regulus</i>	<i>Regulus cristatus</i>	Golden-crowned Kinglet *
Yellow-breasted chat	<i>Motacilla trochilus</i>	<i>Oenanthe Americana pectore luteo</i>	Yellow-breasted Chat

**Birds Listed in Notes on the State of Virginia** (continued)

JEFFERSON'S POPULAR NAME	JEFFERSON'S LINNÆAN DESIGNATION	JEFFERSON'S CATESBY DESIGNATION	MODERN COMMON NAME
Crested titmouse	<i>Parus bicolor</i>	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	Tufted Titmouse
Finch creeper	<i>Parus Americanus</i>	<i>Parus fringillaris</i>	Northern Parula
Yellow rump	<i>Parus Virginianus</i>	<i>Parus uropygeo luteo</i>	Yellow-rumped Warbler *
Hooded titmouse		<i>Parus cucullo nigro</i>	Hooded Warbler
Yellow-throated creeper		<i>Parus Americanus gutture luteo</i>	Yellow-throated Warbler
Yellow titmouse		<i>Parus Caroliniensis</i>	Yellow Warbler
American swallow	<i>Hiauldo Pelasgia</i>	<i>Hirundo cauda aculeate Americana</i>	Chimney Swift
Purple Martin; House Martin	<i>Hirundo purpurea</i>	<i>Hirundo purpurpea</i>	Purple Martin
Goatsucker; Great bat	<i>Caprimulgus Europæus</i>	<i>Caprimulgus</i>	Chuck-will's-widow *
Whip-poor Will	<i>Caprimulgus Europæus</i>	<i>Caprimulgus minor Americanus</i>	Common Nighthawk *
The Royston crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		Crow (sp.) *
Crane	<i>Ardea Canadensis</i>		Sandhill Crane
House swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		Barn Swallow
Ground swallow	<i>Hirundo riparia</i>		Bank Swallow

repeated himself pays scant acknowledgment to Jefferson's scientific and scholarship abilities. Second, any document that offers an additional glimpse into the ornithological history of North America has value. If we were to accept this statement, then arguably one could state that David Sibley's (2000) work is of little importance, since he simply painted and described the same birds as Roger Tory Peterson (1934) did half a century earlier. Lastly, if Jefferson's list merely replicates Catesby's, albeit with a short addendum, how does one explain the absence of such abundant and obvious species such as Laughing Gull and Black Skimmer from the Jefferson list? The explanation is that Jefferson's list is not a duplicate, but rather, a product of his personal observations. The absence of Laughing Gull and Black Skimmer suggests that Jefferson was making his observations along the Virginia shore either during a period when these species were absent, or alternatively, he was unable to make adequate observations of these species to properly identify them using Catesby's work as a reference.

When analyzing the popular names used by Jefferson, a number of interesting problems were noted. The first involved Jefferson's Linnaean designation for the "Pinecreeper." Jefferson mistakenly gave this bird the Linnaean (1766) designation of *Certhia pinus* (Blue-winged Warbler), when in fact, the bird in question is the Pine Warbler (Trotter, 1909).

The next birds that caused confusion are the "Buffel's head" and "Little brown ducks." Knowing Jefferson's reliance on Catesby's work and after reviewing Catesby's paintings, it is clear that these two birds are both Buffleheads, the latter being the female of the species.

A somewhat similar situation holds true for Jefferson's "White face teal" and "Blue wing teals." Catesby's painting of the White face teal clearly depicts a male Blue-winged Teal in breeding plumage. One writer states that Catesby's Blue wing teal is simply a female (Feduccia, 1985). However, his painted and written

descriptions are also somewhat suggestive of a non-breeding male Blue-winged Teal. In either case, we are safe to conclude that both of Jefferson's birds are one species.

The name "Little white heron" is one that was given by Catesby for what appears to be a juvenile Little Blue Heron. The name Little white heron has also been used to refer to the Snowy Egret. Thus, we must examine further. Jefferson attributed the Linnaean name, *Axdea aequinoctialis* to his Little white heron, a designation that does not appear attributable to any species. If we assume a minor misspelling, and that Jefferson intended to write *Ardea aequinoctialis*, then we may be able, through a process of deductive reasoning, conclude that Jefferson was referring to a Snowy Egret. *Ardea aequinoctialis* was a name used in 18th-century Europe for a bird known as the Little White Heron. Thomas Bewick in his "A History of British Birds" examined a specimen of this "species" and readily concluded that it was a juvenile Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*). Both the Little Egret and the Snowy Egret are similar in appearance, and share a notable physical feature, yellow feet. From his time in Europe, Jefferson could have likely encountered the Little Egret, and hence, his use of the above designations is understandable. Accordingly, I think it far more likely that Jefferson was listing a Snowy Egret.

Feduccia's analysis of Catesby's plates for the "Crested and Brown Bitterns" led him to conclude that both were Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, the latter being an immature bird. While Jefferson provided no Linnaean name for his Brown Bittern, he did add the popular name, "Indian hen," to this bird. This moniker was commonly used in conjunction with

the American Bittern; and thus, we must depart from Catesby and conclude that this was the species Jefferson intended to list.

Attempting to discern the identity of Jefferson's "Brown Curlew," a reading of Catesby's text makes clear the identification — a juvenile White Ibis.

Though Catesby included the Sora in his work and, like Jefferson, used the name "Soree," I believe Jefferson's Soree was a Virginia Rail (a bird which does not appear in Catesby's work). Jefferson appended the Linnaean designation of *Rallus Virginianus* to his Soree, and based on this designation, I suspect that Jefferson's bird was the Virginia Rail.



Greater Prairie-Chicken  
©Adrian Binns

Jefferson's "Pheasant" or "Mountain Partridge" also required an examination of Catesby's paintings. Catesby's plate for this bird clearly depicts a Greater Prairie Chicken. Currently we associate this bird with the Midwestern states; however in Catesby and Jefferson's day, a non-migratory population inhabited the Mid-Atlantic States up to New England (Feduccia, 1985). To add additional intrigue, Jefferson provided no Linnaean designation, but under Catesby's designation Jefferson wrote "*Urogallus minor*, or a kind of *Lagopus*." McAtee (1917) noted that the name Mountain Partridge bears the Linnaean designation, *Lagopus rupestris* — Rock Ptarmigan. Was Jefferson suggesting that Rock Ptarmigans were perhaps at one time residents of Virginia? Unlikely, but nevertheless, this example shows the difficulty in translating Jefferson's list into useful historic tool.



Rock Ptarmigan  
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Jefferson provided only the Catesby designation (*Turdus minimus*) for the “Little Thrush.” “Although conceivably a Wood Thrush from the description and certain characteristics, Catesby’s Little Thrush is simply not identifiable” (Feduccia, 1985, p. 101). Unfortunately, Jefferson failed to provide us with any additional clues.

In his first listing of the “Blue gross beak,” Jefferson included the Linnaean designation *Loxia caerulea*. An examination of Catesby’s painting for this species leaves no doubt that the bird in question is a Blue Grosbeak. Thus, what are we to make of Jefferson’s second listing of Blue gross beak? We know that Catesby included the Indigo Bunting (which he called “The Blew Linnet”) in his work. Furthermore, Jefferson provided the Linnaean (1766) name *Tanagra cyanea* to his second Blue gross beak, an early designation attributable to the Indigo Bunting. Unfortunately, there seems to be no clear explanation as to why Jefferson would use the same name twice, when it is clear he intended to list two distinct species.

The “Little sparrow” is the literal translation of Catesby’s designation, *Passerculus*. Jefferson himself offers no additional help as he did not provide a Linnaean name for this bird in *Notes*. To this writer’s eye, an examination of Catesby’s painting offered little clarification to the identity and thus must remain unidentified.

For the “Black-cap flycatcher,” “Little brown flycatcher,” and “Red-eyed flycatcher,” Jefferson provided no corresponding Linnaean names. Thus we are left to rely exclusively on Catesby. The modern names for these three are Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Wood-Pewee, and Red-eyed Vireo respectively.

The Linnaean designation applied by Jefferson for the “Wren,” *Motacilla regulus*, was a name used for the European Goldcrest, a bird that is similar in appearance to our Golden-crowned Kinglet. Catesby called the bird *Regulus Cristatus* and stated that this species was “an English as well as an American bird.”

The longer that time passes from the date a book is published, the greater the difficulty a reader is likely to have in ascertaining the meaning in popular names used by the author. Occasionally however, the oldest

names become the familiar. In the case of Jefferson’s “Yellow rump,” for much of the last two centuries this species was known as the Myrtle’s Warbler, a name first employed by Thomas Nuttall in the early 1800s. Not until 1973, when the American Ornithologists’ Union lumped the Myrtle and Audubon Warblers together did the name revert back to the one used by Jefferson and Catesby.

At first blush, it would seem that no great issues are involved in placing names to Jefferson’s “Goatsucker” (Great Bat) and “Whip-poor-will.” Those who have studied Catesby’s work extensively have concluded otherwise. Early colonists and naturalists:

...were confused as to the number and characteristics of the species *Caprimulgidae* of the region. One, the Nighthawk, forced itself on their sight but may not have impressed them with its notes, while two, the Chuck-will’s-widow and Whip-poor-will, made the woods resound with their calls but were seldom or never seen. The usual consequence was telescoping the three into two, the attributes of which were mixed in various ways. (McAtee, 1948, p. 128).

McAtee concluded that Catesby’s depiction of the Goatsucker of Carolina (reduced by Jefferson to simply Goatsucker) is that of a Chuck-will’s-widow, but notes that the text accompanying that painting is referable to the Nighthawk. In contrast, Catesby’s Whip-poor-will:

may be said to represent the Nighthawk, on account of the white wing-spot, which is very recognizable. Above and below the bill are some long and fantastically arranged bristles, which has led to the belief that the *Antrostonus vociferous* was meant, the more so since Catesby in the text calls the bird ‘Whip-poor-will’...Concerning the bristles, we are justified in presuming that they are due to an intended improvement on the part of the artist (Stejneger, 1885, p. 179).

Thus, we shall designate Chuck-will’s-widow to Jefferson’s Goatsucker and Common Nighthawk to his Whip-poor-will, bearing in mind the caveat that naturalists in Jefferson’s time “were totally confused

**Table 2. Comparison of Common Names**

Table 2. See comments for Table 1.

JEFFERSON'S POPULAR NAME	MODERN COMMON NAME
Greatest grey eagle	Golden Eagle *
Smaller turkey buzzard, with a feathered head	*
Greatest owl, or nighthawk	Great Horned Owl *
Wethawk, which feeds flying	
Raven	Common Raven
Water pelican of the Missisipi, whose pouch holds a peck	Brown Pelican *
Swan	Swan (sp.)
Loon	Loon (sp.)
The Cormorant	Cormorant (sp.)
Duck and Mallard	Mallard
Widgeon	American Widgeon
Sheldrach or Canvas back	Canvasback
Black head	*
Ballcoot	Surf Scoter *
Sprigtail	Ruddy Duck *
Didapper or Dopchick	Eared Grebe *
Spoon billed duck	Northern Shoveler *
Water-witch	Horned Grebe *
Water-pheasant	Northern Pintail *
Mow-bird	*
Blue peter	American Coot
Water wagtail	Spotted Sandpiper *
Yellow-legged snipe	Yellowlegs (sp.) *
Squatting snipe	Wilson's Snipe
Small plover	Semipalmated or Piping Plover *
Whistling plover	American Golden or Black-bellied Plover *
Woodcock	American Woodcock
Red bird, with black head, wings and tail	Vermilion Flycatcher *

"And doubtless many others which have not yet been described and classed" (Jefferson)

as to the number of species of goatsuckers and their characteristics" (Feduccia, 1985, p. 73).

*Corvus cornix* refers to the "Hooded Crow," a European bird that was undoubtedly familiar to Jefferson, given the lengthy periods of time he spent on that continent. Furthermore, in overall size, this species is similar to our American and Fish Crow. Thus, while I was unable to find a reference for "The Royston Crow," given the Linnaean designation, we can conclude that Jefferson was referring to one of these two North American crow species.

The second group of birds, totaling 28 (Table 2), proved far more problematic. For these birds, Jefferson failed to provide any reference to Linnaeus or Catesby. Thus we must apply a bit of deductive reasoning and common sense to our analysis. Five are immediately evident, the "Raven," "Mallard," "Widgeon," "Canvas back," and "Woodcock" being our Common Raven, Mallard, American Widgeon, Canvasback and American Woodcock respectively. Three others (Swan, Loon, and the Cormorant), we can reasonably assign to their appropriate species with the qualifier "sp."

Given what Jefferson had already listed and just as importantly, what he had not listed, we can fairly deduce from the descriptive names that the most likely species Jefferson was referring to for his "Greatest owl" and "Yellow-legged snipe" were the Great Horned Owl and Yellowlegs (sp.) (Johnston, 2003).

As to the "Water pelican of the Missisipi, whose pouch holds a peck," it is likely appropriate to identify this bird as our Brown Pelican, a bird common to the Southern Mississippi River area.

Jefferson didn't have the benefits that we enjoy from modern optics. Hence, it is probably fair to assume that many of his observations were made largely from the naked eye. Thus, assuming that Jefferson's "Greatest grey eagle" is intended to be a species distinct from the Bald Eagle, then I believe we can attribute this designation to the Golden Eagle, a bird which in adult plumage could appear completely dark to an observer without binoculars.

Jefferson named our modern Pied-billed Grebe, the "Pied bill dopchick." Assuming that Jefferson did

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not intend to repeat himself, then what birds are his “Didapper,” “Dopchick,” and “Water-witch”? These are all names that have been used in association with the smaller Grebes. In one reference, the local name used for the Horned Grebe was Water-witch (Bishop, 1889). One writer, Johnston (2003), without explanation, has also applied the name Water-witch to the Storm-petrel’s. Could Jefferson have meant to apply Didapper or Dopchick to the Eared Grebe? This I submit is a reasonable assumption.

Jefferson’s use of “Spoon billed duck” was a common nickname for the Northern Shoveler dating back to 17th-century Europe (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Catesby called his shoveler the “Blue wing shoveler,” and his painting and description is suggestive of a female. Given the notable differences between the female and the breeding male, could Jefferson have erred in listing the male and female as two distinct species? Without further information, no other explanation seems logical.

One of Catesby’s predecessors to the new world, John Lawson published in 1709, *A New Voyage to Carolina*, based on his 8 years traveling in the Carolinas. Included in that work was his description of over 100 bird species, including the “Black Flusterers” or “bald Coot.” McAtee (1946) examined Lawson’s work and noted that his written description of this species corresponds to the Surf Scoter. He also suggests Jefferson’s use of Ball coot was “merely abbreviated from Lawson’s work” (p. 243).

In my research, I found the name “Sprigtail” used as an appellation for both the Ruddy Duck and the Northern Pintail (*Webster*, 1913); whereas for “Water pheasant,” this name was used in reference to the Northern Pintail and Hooded Merganser (*American Heritage*, 2000). Since Jefferson previously used Catesby’s “Round crested duck” for the Merganser, we can apply Water pheasant to the Northern Pintail. This then leaves us with Sprigtail for the Ruddy Duck.

One source suggested that Jefferson’s identity of the “Water wagtail” was the Spotted Sandpiper (Johnston, 2003). This nickname however has also been applied to the Waterthrushes. I think it more likely that Jefferson was referencing the sandpiper in as much as he listed this bird amongst the other shorebirds, and



Northern Flicker  
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the name he employed is suggestive of a characteristic associated with this species.

Johnston (2003) also offered, without explanation, Scaup (sp.) for “Black head” and Black-headed Gull for the “Mow-bird.” While arguably the name Black head is somewhat descriptive of a scaup, it is certainly a name that could be also hung on any number of other likely candidates. Thus, I believe that these two birds must remain unidentified.

As to the “Small Plover,” since Jefferson had already listed Killdeer, the likely candidate for this bird is either the Semipalmated or Piping Plover. Likewise, in the case of the “Whistling Plover,” we can safely assume that Jefferson was referring to an American Golden or Black-bellied Plover. Johnston (2003) also offered Upland Sandpiper, again without explanation, for the possible identity of this species. Jefferson’s use of the term plover is important. Even without the aid of sophisticated optics, Jefferson would have been able to

note the characteristic shape and size of a plover bill. By listing the Small and Whistling Plovers together, Jefferson was likely relating these two species together based on similar characteristics.

As for the “Red bird with black head, wings, and tail,” without any additional clues, at best we can simply speculate to the identity. A cursory review of field guides for Eastern North America suggests that the closest bird to Jefferson’s descriptive name is the male Vermilion Flycatcher which does show black (or dark gray) extending up the nape of the neck.

For some birds, however, we are left with no useful clues. Their identity must remain a mystery. These include “Smaller turkey buzzard” with a feathered head and “Wethawk which feeds while flying.” For most of North America’s avifauna, someone, somewhere, at some time during this continent’s inhabited history, employed a bird name different from that which we now know as that species. In an article by the same title, one writer was able to track down 132 vernacular names for the Flicker (Burns, 1916). If one considers the number of different bird species which either pass through or reside in Virginia and assume that for each species, only 25 times a different vernacular name has been used for each, a true glimpse of enormity of the problem becomes apparent. The task of sifting through various names is further compounded by the fact that many names have been only used by a handful of people, for a short period of time, and those names are now lost to memory. Even with

our modern ability to perform complex computer searches, some of Jefferson’s names could simply not be correlated with a modern equivalent.

As one can see, attempting to decipher 18th-century colloquial names used for bird species 200 hundred years after publication is difficult, and at times, a fruitless proposition. In an article written in 1947, Ludlow Griscom delved into the problems and complexities associated with periodic review and changes made by the American Ornithologists’ Union to the names utilized in the *Checklist of North American Birds*. His insights bear comment. Certainly, Griscom was correct when he wrote that the “growth of knowledge of natural history inevitably makes older vernacular names too local, incorrect, or absurd on one count or another” (p. 131). Yet, I must humbly disagree with his assessment that “common or vernacular names are not necessary for the amateur naturalist, and it is a psychosis to think so” (Griscom, 1947, p. 131). One cannot now suddenly “un-ring” the bell. Unless we are willing to ignore the past, we must endeavor to understand our predecessors’ meaning in the common names they utilized. To ignore those names would otherwise render much of North America’s early ornithological history to the trash bin. While the use of the term “Sparrow Hawk” may now be obsolete, knowing that Jefferson’s Sparrow Hawk is Sibley’s American Kestrel is important for any current or future student of ornithology. Without that knowledge how otherwise are we to fully understand the changes in avifauna population and distribution?

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