

**Change the specific/subspecific/morphological group name of the Red-shafted Flicker from *cafer* to *lathamii***

**Background:**

In the first five editions of the AOU Check-List, Yellow-shafted and Red-shafted Flickers held separate species status as *Colaptes auratus* (Linnaeus, 1758) and *Colaptes cafer* (Gmelin, 1788), respectively (AOU 1886, 1895, 1910, 1931, 1957). These birds were lumped in 1982 as the Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*) due to the extensive interbreeding where the two forms meet in a broad hybrid zone in the middle of North America (AOU 1982; Short 1965; Wiebe and Moore 2017). Despite strong evidence for extensive hybridization, outside of this zone the two flicker taxa remain highly diagnosable based on a suite of independent plumage characters (Wiebe and Moore 2017). Moreover, they are still often described using their original specific epithets as separate named “morphological groups” in scientific publications (e.g. Aguillon et al. 2018; Manthey et al. 2017; Hudon et al. 2017; Hudon et al. 2015) and various checklists (Avibase 2018; Sullivan et al. 2009), including the most recent AOS Checklist and its supplements (AOU 1998; Figure 1). Some checklists have even begun to list them again as separate named species (del Hoyo and Collar 2014).

The focus of this proposal is on the use of *cafer* as the specific/subspecific/morphological group designation of the Red-shafted Flicker. This name is directly derived from “kaffir,” a word that is an extremely offensive ethnic slur against Black South Africans. To avoid using this slur again in this proposal, we will henceforth refer to it as “the k-word.” In this proposal, we will explain (1) that *cafer* was chosen as a scientific epithet specifically due to the k-word’s use as a description of a group of people and describe the extreme offensiveness of the k-word; (2) outline precedents related to this proposal and how other societies have dealt with the k-word; and (3) propose an alternative name with historical precedent.

**New Information:**

The reason that this North American bird has a name derived from a slur against an African people is due to a historical mistake. In 1782, John Latham described the type specimen of the Red-shafted Flicker as a variety of the Yellow-shafted Flicker (the then Gold-winged Woodpecker; Palmer 1916). Johann Gmelin in 1788 used Latham’s description to designate the Red-shafted Flicker as a separate species, *cafer* (Palmer suggests that Gmelin did not provide credit to Latham either “due to inadvertence or to the fact that Latham gave no distinctive name or number to the Red-shafted Flicker”). In his description, Latham mistakenly described the type locality as the “Cape of Good Hope” of South Africa rather than the “Bay of Good Hope” (as designated by Captain James Cook) in Nootka Sound, British Columbia (Palmer 1916). It is unclear if this was a result of transposed labels or a simple typographical error, but the outcome is that Gmelin used South Africa’s Cape of Good Hope as the locality of the Red-shafted Flicker type specimen. Consequently, he named the Red-shafted Flicker after the Xhosa people, then known to Europeans as the K-word people (other alternative spellings included Cafri and Cafar).

Although the k-word was originally widely used by Europeans (although still in a pejorative sense), the term has now become universally regarded as an extreme ethnic slur and the absolute height of offensiveness (Pérez-Peña 2018). Particularly during the apartheid era, the k-word was used by White South Africans to degrade Black South Africans. A statement made during a 2008 South African Parliament sitting describes how its use is viewed today: “We should take care not to use derogatory words that were used to demean black persons in this country. Words such as ‘Kaffir,’ ‘coolie,’ ‘Boesman,’ ‘hotnot’ and many others have negative connotations and remain offensive as they were used to degrade, undermine and strip South Africans of their humanity and dignity” (GCIS 2008). The k-word is now considered so egregious in South Africa that it is typically referred to only as “the k-word,” and there are substantial legal penalties (including jail time) for its usage (Pérez-Peña 2018). The evolution in usage of this word is directly comparable (including the present-day severity of the slur and the avoidance of speaking it) to the n-word, which in North America we treat as fundamentally unacceptable in any context.

### **Does a precedent exist for this kind of proposal?**

The official protocols for how to handle this sort of circumstance are not entirely clear, as it is (fortunately) a rare issue. The International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature’s Code of Ethics states, “no author should propose a name that, to his or her knowledge or reasonable belief, would be likely to give offence on any grounds” (ICZN 2012), but it does not prescribe a specific protocol for addressing existing offensive names. Below we outline two concerns that arise from this issue that should not influence consideration of the proposal: (1) this is a subspecies level issue, and (2) mistaken locality information is involved. Finally, we discuss how other ornithological societies have dealt with similar naming issues.

Although the North American Classification Committee typically does not deal with issues at the subspecies level, the case of the Red-shafted Flicker is unusual and likely within the scope of appropriate oversight by the Committee. As described in the Background, Red-shafted Flickers were once classified as a separate species (*Colaptes cafer*) and although they have since been lumped with Yellow-shafted Flickers into the Northern Flicker, the “morphological group” still retains the original specific epithet and is widely used (e.g. Aguilon et al. 2018; Manthey et al. 2017; Hudon et al. 2017; Hudon et al. 2015; Avibase 2018; Sullivan et al. 2009), even in the current Check-List of North American Birds (AOU 1998; Figure 1). Some checklists have even begun to again classify them separately as *Colaptes cafer* (del Hoyo and Collar 2014). Thus, it seems appropriate for the Committee to provide oversight in this unusual situation.

An important part of the flicker’s taxonomic history involves the mistaken locality of the type specimen used by Latham and Gmelin in their description and designation of *cafer*. This geographic mistake in naming is no reason in itself to suggest an official name change and is not the focus of our proposal (there are many similar examples in ornithological nomenclature, including for example the familiar *Buteo jamaicensis* that has never occurred in Jamaica).

Because there are no clear protocols for how to deal with this situation, we can look to how it has been dealt with by other societies. In 2015, Sweden’s Ornithological Society undertook the massive task of translating the 10,000+ bird species names into Swedish (The Local 2015). In this process, they changed the names for several species due to concerns that they were

offensive. Anders Wirdheim from the society stated, “while we were [creating the translated list] we decided to change the names of any birds that could have stirred up a debate” (The Local 2015). Related to this proposal, swifts are no longer called “kaffer” in Swedish (alternative spellings include “the k-word” and “caffer”), but they also changed “neger” (“negro” in Swedish) to “svart” (“black” in Swedish) in four species names and renamed a duck formerly named “Hottentot” and the Hoatzin, formerly “Zigenarfågel” (“gypsy bird” in Swedish). Although a non-bird example, there have also been moves to change the name of the “k-word lime,” even in the United States (Denn 2014), with the Oxford Companion to Food suggesting the alternative “makrut lime” (Vannithone 1999).

### **Discussion:**

We are not the first to write about the naming of the Red-shafted Flicker. In the early 20th century, Elliott Coues included an illuminating passage in his book *Key to North American Birds* (1903):

With every disposition to follow the dogma and ritual of the A.O.U., I cannot bring myself to call this bird *C. cafer*, for no better reason than because *Picus cafer* Gm. 1788 was mistaken for a bird of the Cape of Good Hope! Say what we please in our canons, there *is* something in a name after all, and “the letter of the law killeth” when wrenched from its spirit, in defiance of science and common sense. Individually I cannot incur the penalty of deliberately using for a North American bird a name only applicable to one from South Africa. The fact that “*Cafer*” is a sort of Latin for Caffraria or Cafrarian makes its use in this connection as bad as “Hottentot Woodpecker” or “Zulu Flicker” would be; and how would such a combination sound in plain English? [emphasis in original]

Although Coues emphasizes the mistaken geography (which we note is not an accepted rationale for re-naming), we agree that “there *is* something in a name after all” and we believe it is beyond the bounds of appropriate behavior to use a racial or ethnic slur as a scientific name. In effect, the use of *cafer* for the Red-shafted Flicker places everyone who knows about its derivation from the k-word in the position of perpetuating a very offensive ethnic slur. As the AOS is currently focused on becoming a more diverse and inclusive professional society, we feel it is incumbent on us to make good-faith efforts to rectify past exclusionary mistakes, particularly those of this severity.

We suggest that it is no more appropriate to continue to use a word derived directly from the k-word as the scientific name than it would be to use a name derived from the n-word. In considering whether or not to change the name of the Red-shafted Flicker, it may be useful to engage in the following thought experiment: how would the North American ornithological community feel about an African bird named “the n-word” (with two g’s) after the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Black residents of our own communities? The simple fact that the k-word is unfamiliar to most people from the Americas does not make its use acceptable.

We therefore propose that the current scientific name of the Red-shafted Flicker be replaced by the scientific name *lathamii*. This change was proposed in 1827 by Wagler “as a substitute for Gmelin’s inappropriate name *cafer*” (Palmer 1916).

## Recommendation:

Change the specific/subspecific/morphological group name *cafer* Gmelin 1788 of the Red-shafted Flicker to *lathamii* Wagler 1827 (**see Note below**).

**[Note from the Chair:** The International Code of Zoological Nomenclature allows scientific nomenclature to be changed only under certain conditions, and the action proposed in the Recommendation is outside the purview of our committee. Implications of this issue extend well beyond *Colaptes cafer*, because *cafer* and its variants are used for a number of species of African birds, as well as single species in southern Asia and in Polynesia. Moreover, *cafer* and its variants are species names for many organisms in other taxonomic groups, placing the broader issue largely outside of our area, both geographically and taxonomically.]

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**Habitat.**—River-edge Forest, Secondary Forest, Mangrove Forest (0–1500 m; Tropical Zone).

**Distribution.**—*Resident* in Panama (locally on the Pacific slope from eastern Panamá province east to Darién), and in South America from northern Colombia, Venezuela, and the Guianas south, east of the Andes, to central Bolivia, and western and central Amazonian Brazil.

**Notes.**—*Chrysoptilus punctigula* and the South American *C. melanochloros* (Gmelin, 1788) may constitute a superspecies (Short 1982). This species is often placed in the genus *Chrysoptilus*.

***Colaptes auratus* (Linnaeus). Northern Flicker.**

*Cuculus auratus* Linnaeus, 1758, Syst. Nat. (ed. 10) 1: 112. Based on “The Golden-winged Wood-pecker” Catesby, Nat. Hist. Carolina 1: 18, pl. 18. (in Carolina = South Carolina.)

**Habitat.**—Open woodland, both deciduous and coniferous, open situations with scattered trees and snags, riparian woodland, pine-oak association, and parks (Subtropical and Temperate zones).

**Distribution.**—Breeds [*auratus group*] from western and central Alaska, northern Yukon, northwestern and southern Mackenzie, northern Manitoba, northern Ontario, north-central Quebec, south-central Labrador, and Newfoundland south through central and eastern British Columbia, west-central and southwestern Alberta, eastern Montana, and eastern North America (east of the Rocky Mountains) to central and eastern Texas, the Gulf coast, and southern Florida (including the upper Florida Keys); and [*cafer group*] from southeastern Alaska, coastal and southern British Columbia (including the Queen Charlotte and Vancouver islands), west-central and southern Alberta, and southwestern Saskatchewan south (from the western edge of the Great Plains westward) to northern Baja California (formerly also on Guadalupe Island), southern Arizona, southern New Mexico, and western Texas, and in the interior highlands of Mexico to west-central Veracruz and Oaxaca (west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec).

*Winters* [*auratus group*] from southern Canada (rarely to the northern limits of the breeding range) south through the remainder of the breeding range to southern Texas, the Gulf coast, and southern Florida (including the Florida Keys), rarely to the Pacific states from Washington south to California, Arizona, and New Mexico; and [*cafer group*] generally throughout the breeding range and east to eastern Kansas, eastern Oklahoma, and eastern and southern Texas, the northern populations being largely migratory.

*Resident* [*chrysocaulosus group*] on Cuba (including Cayo Coco and Cayo Romano), the Isle of Pines, and Cayman Islands (Grand Cayman); and [*mexicanoides group*] in the highlands of Middle America from Chiapas south through Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to north-central Nicaragua.

Casual [*auratus group*] north to the Arctic and Bering coasts of Alaska, islands in the Bering Sea (St. George in the Pribilofs, and Nunivak), and northern Quebec, and south to northern Mexico; and [*cafer group*] east to northern Alberta, southern Keewatin, Manitoba, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, and Arkansas. Accidental [*auratus group*] in the British Isles and Denmark; and [*cafer group*] in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Florida.

**Notes.**—Also known as Common Flicker. The two northern groups were formerly treated as separate species, *C. auratus* [Yellow-shafted Flicker] and *C. cafer* [Red-shafted Flicker] (Short 1965a, 1965b, 1982, Johnson 1969, Bock 1971, Moore and Buchanan 1985, Moore and Koenig 1986, Grudzien et al. 1987, Moore 1987, Moore et al. 1991, Moore and Price 1993); the other two groups, which are isolates, have usually been treated as races of one of the preceding, *mexicanoides* [Guatemalan Flicker] and *chrysocaulosus* [Cuban Flicker] (Short 1965b) in *C. cafer* and *C. auratus*, respectively (Short 1967a). See comments under *C. chrysoides*.

***Colaptes chrysoides* (Malherbe). Gilded Flicker.**

*Geopicus (Colaptes) chrysoïdes* Malherbe, 1852, Rev. et Mag. Zool., ser 2, 4, p. 553. (l'Amérique; restricted to Cape San Lucas, Baja California, by Anthony, 1895, Auk, 12, p. 347.)

**Figure 1.** Page 344 from the 7<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Check-List of North American Birds (1998) demonstrating the separate treatment of *auratus* and *cafer* morphological groups in the Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*).