

AviCulture - What's In A Bird's Name?

John Gould named the Lady Gouldian finch after his wife, who helped him create many illustrated works

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William Swainson

It's amazing how many birds are named after a guy named Swainson. William Swainson was born in Liverpool, England in 1789. He was an English naturalist, author and illustrator.

John Gould named the Lady Gouldian finch in honor of his wife, Elizabeth.

After finishing a stint in the army in 1815, he headed to Brazil to pursue his lifetime interest — natural history. When he returned from collecting plants and animals he became a Fellow of the Royal Society. A talented illustrator, he believed the art of zoological illustration should be as noble as any art form.

Why Swainson?

So why did taxonomists name birds after this man? It comes from the quantity and quality of zoological publications he produced. These include *Zoological Illustrations*, *Exotic Conchology*, *The Geography and Classification of Animals*, *Birds of Western Africa*, *Flycatchers*, *Animals in Menageries*, *Taxidermy*, *Treatise on Malacology or Shells and Shellfish*, and *The Natural History and Classification of Quadrupeds*.

Swainson's *Fauna Boreali-Americana* inspired early American naturalist Thomas Nuttall to name a thrush for Swainson. French naturalist Charles Lucien Bonaparte named his new hawk after him, and Audubon named the Swainson's warbler in his honor. In fact, Audubon asked Swainson to help him with his *Ornithological Biology*, but Swainson refused because his name would not have appeared on the title page. Their friendship thereafter waned.

Swainson made his contributions in the period before our current system of taxonomy, well before the relationships between species were understood. With the arrival of Darwin's ideas of evolution, the beginnings of taxonomy emerged causing Swainson's theories to become discounted by the zoological community.

Unable to get another post in the British Museum and with the death of his wife, in 1852 he immigrated to New Zealand. While in New Zealand, as well as Australia, he took up the study of botany, but published nothing.

His Contribution

Besides Swainson's avian discoveries, he should be recognized as the first illustrator to use lithography in bird book illustrations. This opened the era of fine, hand-colored plates in bird books, the first of which was the three-volume work *Zoological Illustrations*. The lithographic plates were drawn and printed by Swainson himself. He died in 1855.

John Gould

This next person has only a single bird named after him, but not really after him at all, rather named by him in honor of his wife, Elizabeth. The man is John Gould, and the bird, the colorful Australian native — Lady Gouldian finch (*Poephila gouldiae*).

Gould was born in England in 1804. He was the son of a garden worker, a vocation he himself followed at the age of 13. He had no formal education but became a self-taught taxidermist, fascinated by nature from an early age.

At the age of 21 he started a taxidermy business in London. In 1832 he was listed in the London Business Directory as "a bird and beast stuffer." A year later he appeared as "a naturalist." This was an exciting time for young Gould; the world was filled with new discoveries. Many strange, unknown animals were being brought back to London with returning expeditions.

Besides his taxidermy business, he accepted the position of Curator and Preserver to the Museum of the Zoological Society of London. During this period he traveled widely in England and in Europe buying and selling preserved specimens.

In 1829 John Gould married Elizabeth Coxen, who was an accomplished artist. In 1830 he published his first scientific

paper and began the life for which he is most noted. He and Elizabeth soon started their publishing enterprise.

Gould's Published Works

At this time in the 19th century, steam had just been harnessed to drive printing presses. Books were printed faster than ever before and far more cheaply. Many titles were produced, and the number of readers grew. Gould recognized this, but cheap reading material was not his thing. He wanted books to be of the highest quality, expensive and financed by pre-subscription.

Gould recognized his own artistic shortcomings and hired some of the best artists and illustrators of the day to help with his works. One was a famous artist and creator of nonsense rhymes, Edward Lear, who also helped pioneer the process of lithography in which illustrations are drawn on limestone plates or blocks and then transferred onto paper. Lear taught Elizabeth Gould how to produce the limestone blocks for Gould's works. Gould did the original drawings, then Elizabeth transferred them to the limestone and helped with the hand coloring of each plate.

During the next 50 years, Gould and his artists produced 14 titles in 49 volumes, all published in huge Imperial Folio format. Each animal was illustrated in a large (sometimes larger than life-size) lithograph. Three thousand colored plates were produced in this manner.

Many of the lithographs attributed to Gould were actually done by Lear. Gould felt that since he had paid for the lithograph, it was his, and in his books he showed himself and Elizabeth as the artists and lithographers. Lear left the partnership soon after they finished the lithographs in Darwin's *Zoology of the Voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle*.

Gould was at work on his seven-volume *Birds of Australia* when, in 1841, Elizabeth died during the birth of their eighth child. She was 37. He was lucky enough to obtain the skills of an excellent artist and lithographer, H. C. Richter, who worked with him until Gould died in 1881.

Today you can do an internet search and find many of Gould's plates. It's pretty obvious he owes his reputation to the assistance of many artists, lithographers and colorists, not the least of which was Lady Gould.