

Editorial

"Taxonomy (the science of classification) is often undervalued as a glorified form of filing—with each species in its prescribed place in an album; but taxonomy is a fundamental and dynamic science, dedicated to exploring the causes of relationships and similarities among organisms. Classifications are theories about the basis of natural order, not dull catalogues compiled only to avoid chaos." Stephen Jay Gould (1990; *Wonderful life: The Burgess shale and the nature of history*. Hutchinson Radius.)

There is an old adage that states, "Wisdom begins by calling things by their right names." That is what taxonomy aims to do—name all life without confusion or ambiguity. At least that was what Carl von Linne set out to do almost 250 years ago. His classifications were based on basic morphology; today, additional criteria including song and DNA are used. The rules of the game are these days known as the *International Code of Zoological Nomenclature* and are framed by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, based in London.

Although taxonomy is a science for the professional (and perhaps the serious amateur), taxonomic decisions have two important consequences that affect all of us, birdwatchers and scientists alike.

One consequence is a direct result of the order that nomenclature brings into a world that humans perceive as confusing. Scientific nomenclature (i.e.,

naming) isolates each taxon (genus, species, subspecies, etc.) so precisely that confusion with another does not arise. However, this is not the case with the common names of birds. Names within a language, say English, have changed over the years and are a source of constant disagreement between birdwatchers as they are not bound by rules as is scientific nomenclature. Different languages call the house crow by different names. But its scientific binomen is the same throughout the world - *Corvus splendens*. So, nomenclature is a precision tool for naming a taxon.

Another use of taxonomy is indirect, but of serious impact. With the ongoing evolution of taxonomic methodology, the status of taxa is in flux. A more flexible tool bag than in Linnaean times allows contemporary taxonomists to achieve greater accuracy in establishing a taxon. This might result in species

being split, races being promoted to species level, and so on. Such changes might lead to the recognition of a taxon that requires conservation action—perhaps because of its endemism, rarity or threatened survival. So, nomenclature becomes an engine for conservation action.

Given its importance, we hope that the paper on taxonomy in this issue of *Indian Birds* will be of great interest to you, our readers, and help you unravel the intricacies of this evolving science. We are grateful to the authors and the editor of *British Birds* for allowing us to reprint the paper in *Indian Birds*.

All this notwithstanding, the subjects of this science go about their lives, blissfully ignorant of our esoteric labours, yet dependent on us for their continued survival.

-Aasheesh Pittie