

Whatever happened to our



Presently the vernacular names of southern African birds are in a state of flux, with numerous 'new' supposedly international names proposed. Now would consequently be an excellent time to redress a grievous error in renaming two major groups of terrestrial gamebirds, well-known by their original names of 'partridge' and 'francolins' since the very first edition of 'Roberts in 1940, but which appear to be increasingly subject to 'strange' names, perhaps illustrating the drift between practical and theoretical scientists. Names should facilitate communication and understanding among various interest groups, particularly when they refer to economic bird groups of undoubted interest to landowners, farmers, hunters, conservationists, administrators, legislators and the public in general.

Following a recent publication (Little and Crowe, 2000) in which the term 'spurfowl' for our francolins is suggested, the National Gamebird Federation, a South African umbrella body representing 11 national organizations concerned with gamebird conservation, management and utilization with a combined membership of 16,000 plus, strongly recommends that the well-known vernacular names 'partridge' and 'francolin' be retained for these species in Africa for sound practical reasons.

Traditionally, for more than 300 years, South Africans made an easy distinction between the two groups of terrestrial gamebirds that were divided into 'partridges' and 'francolins' in English and 'patryse' and 'fisante' in Afrikaans. The early naturalists, together with the farmers and hunters, readily saw the similarity of the more cryptic smaller partridge-like squatters to their European counterparts and promptly named them as such. They also recognised the larger upright-type birds as being different from both the partridge and the pheasant and

consequently the name 'francolin' came into use. All naturalists, farmers, hunters, and conservation officials used these names, and even newcomers soon spotted the difference and everybody knew which birds were involved (Wolff and Milstein, 1976). Even today, many overseas visitors and laymen almost invariably see the similarity between our partridges and those in their own countries.

Matters, however, got confused in the early sixties when a scientist declared that she could find few differences between these two groups and tentatively suggested that we should call all of them 'francolins' until differences could be demonstrated (Hall, 1963). This interim suggestion was regrettably immediately taken up in the bird books and caused unnecessary friction, and in some cases irreparable damage to the relationship between hunter and landowner. Often hunters shot what their book knowledge told them were francolin, only to discover that the birds turned out to be the scarcer partridges that the landowner had specifically forbade them to shoot. Legally the situation became ridiculous in some provinces, where, if you went according to the letter of the law, you were quite legal when you shot (in English) all francolin species, but became a criminal when you shot (in Afrikaans) the 'patryse'. Farmers, conservationists and hunters alike solved this problem by always referring back to the old partridge or francolin divisions whenever these birds were discussed.

Recently, however, scientists have 'discovered' that the farmers, hunters and conservationists were right all along and that the differences between these two groups are indeed large enough not only to warrant different genera but even to place them on different evolutionary branches (Crowe, Harley and Jakutowicz 1992, Crowe, Harley, Jakutowicz, Komen and Crowe, 1992). Instead of solving the confusion it has, regrettably, increased it since a scientist now, on the basis of the

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hypothetical ancestral quail, insists that what everybody knows as partridges are now classified under the genus *Francolinus* and should be called francolins and that the original francolins are classified under the genus *Pternistis* but should be called spurfowls. The name 'spurfowl' derives from *Francolinus leucosceptus* in East Africa which was named spurfowl by a scientist with an apparent disregard for the common name in usage. This also completely ignores the fact that the name 'spurfowl' is historically reserved for certain Asian bantam-like birds of the *Galloperdix* group, namely the Red Spurfowl *Galloperdix spadicea*, the Ceylon Spurfowl *G. bicalcarata* and the Painted Spurfowl *G. lunulata*, all of which occur in Asia (Sibley and Monroe 1996).

Now the confusion borders nationally and internationally on Babylonian chaos. Apart from the fact that the spurfowl name is totally non-descriptive since virtually all phasianids have spurs and all galliniforms are called fowls, one might wonder if one is in India or Africa. Also, just imagine what it is going to sound like if you try to translate it into Afrikaans or any of the other African languages.

For those of us who are conservation-minded, however, the situation is far more serious. If mere academic difference of opinion was at stake it would not have mattered as much, but the conservation of some of our scarcer partridge species is at stake. Confusion between the scarcer and more habitat-specific partridges and the more abundant and more resilient francolin species, which many farmers regard as pests, can cause irreparable damage to some of our gamebird populations. Already there has been incidences reported where the hunters inadvertently shot what the farmer knows as partridges while the farmer actually had only given permission to shoot the francolins. In other incidents farmers did not implement conservation management measures for their partridges since they thought that the measures applied to the francolins, which they wanted to reduce because of perceived crop damage.

Over the last 30 years it became clear that individual scientists could not change traditional common names that have been in usage for more than 300 years and have proven to be a more correct biological division in the first place. Not only do these names bridge the gap between English and Afrikaans, but many of the other African languages have also adapted the group terms 'partridges' and 'francolins' since their languages do not readily distinguish between the different species. From a taxonomic point of view the term 'partridge' is not restricted to the *Perdix* of Europe, but is used worldwide for some 53 different species classified in 17 different genera and from different evolutionary branches. In all cases the term

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'partridge' refers to medium-sized squatter type gamebirds with similar habits. Clearly the term 'partridge' is not restrictive and promotes worldwide recognition of a group with an apparent parallel or convergent evolutionary development.

Madge and McGowan (2002) in their book 'Pheasant, Partridges and Grouse', the leading authority on terrestrial gamebirds of the world, state that the revision of Crowe *et al.* (1992) has not been universally accepted, and they regard Crowe's revision as subgenera of *Francolinus*. To avoid confusion with the Asian spurfowl, Madge and McGowan (2002) continue to use the term 'francolin', following the vernacular name long used in South Africa and adopted by Urban *et al.* (1986).

In conclusion we would like to formally add our plea to that of Milstein and Wolff (1984) and Duff (2000) that our gamebirds

should be recognized by their grassroot names by the entire public and not only by the so-called initiated. If there should be a distinction required between our gamebirds and the European counterparts, let us refer back to the established names and if necessary call them African partridges and African francolins and in so doing end the confusion and promote conservation instead of trying to talk over the heads of the public and unnecessarily confuse them, to the detriment of gamebird conservation. ▲

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Addendum

The National Gamebird Federation includes: The African Gamebird Research Education and Development Trust (AGRED), S.A. Wingshooters Association, the Confederation of Hunters Associations (CHASA), East Cape Game Management Association, National Field Trial Association, Professional Hunters Association (PHASA), South African Field Trial Liaison Council, South African Falconry Association, South African Game Organization, the Southern African Wildlife Management Association and others.

Professor Bigalke contributed and approved of the first draft of this article, shortly before his sad and untimely death.