

Letters

Language and ornithology

A. G. Blunt's advice on the pronunciation of scientific names (*Brit. Birds* 102: 25–28) makes interesting reading and I wish those involved in promoting classical pronunciation every success. Such abominations as 'Beauty-oh' for *Buteo* (should be 'Boo-teh-aw'), 'Troglodie-tees' for *Troglodytes* (Troglodie-tess) and 'Puffyness' for *Puffinus* (Poo-fee-noose), among many others, have always struck me as implausible – but I am a native speaker of

Spanish as well as English. When scientific names are pronounced as Spanish words, or those of other Latin-derived languages, most of the advised criteria are met. I fear that it will take a lot to shift British usage away from the straitjacket of, especially, English vowel sounds, at least among those who do not also speak a Latin-derived language. Still, it is well worth a try.

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I read with amusement the recent letter on pronunciation of scientific names (*Brit. Birds* 102: 25–28), and assumed that it was written by M. Python. However, joking aside, there is an important issue here, about which I have been intending to write to *BB* for some months.

In terms of pronunciation, it is of course futile to even contemplate a 'correct pronunciation' since scientific names are not Latin names. They are based largely, though not entirely, on Latin. And the Latin on which they are based is not classical Latin. It probably has more affinity with medieval church Latin or even botanical Latin, both of which are recognised as distinct. To suggest that there is a 'correct' way of pronouncing Latin is like going back to the days when there was a 'correct', 'BBC', way of pronouncing English. And just as Spanish has a huge range of pronunciation (and even meanings for the same words), so does Latin and all its derivatives. There wasn't even an

Italian language a couple of hundred years ago.

The fundamental issue is that scientific names are there to act as a lingua franca. Originally, they were used largely in literature, and so pronunciation was of little importance. And even now, I don't actually see the problem. I spend a huge proportion of my working life using scientific names, mostly with colleagues whose first language is not English. I rarely, if ever, have any problems understanding what they are talking about, since the permutations of pronunciation are fairly limited, even if the various dialects of Spanish-speaking South Americans use different stresses and pronunciation from those used in Italy and other parts of the Romance-speaking world. When we are trying to communicate about birds and other wildlife, there are usually far more important issues to worry about than whether or not we have pronounced a name 'correctly'.

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Looking back

One hundred years ago:

'BRÜNNICH'S GUILLEMOT IN THE FIRTH OF FORTH. A female specimen of Brünnich's Guillemot (*Uria bruennichi*) was picked up dead on the shore at Craigielaw Point, on the Haddingtonshire coast of the Firth of Forth, on December 11th, 1908, and was sent

to the Royal Scottish Museum by Mr. Valentine Knight. Judging by the size of the bill, which measures along the curve of the culmen only 1.2 inches, Mr. Clarke considers the specimen a bird of the year (W. Eagle Clarke, *Ann. S. N. H.*, 1909, pp. 75 and 76).' (*Brit. Birds* 2: 425, May 1909)