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THE OREGON DARK-EYED JUNCO SHOULD BE CALLED *JUNCO HYEMALIS OREGANA*

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ABSTRACT: John Kirk Townsend introduced the Oregon Junco to science as *Fringilla oregana*, but since 1856 it has been classified in the genus *Junco* as *Junco oreganus*, *Junco oregonus*, *Junco hyemalis oreganus* or *Junco hyemalis oregonus*. The change of spelling to *oregonus* is not justified under the current International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, and since 1901 *oreganus* has been used universally. Under the code's articles 31 and 34 adjectival species-group names (both species and subspecies) must agree in grammatical gender with the genus with which they are combined. Under Article 30, *Junco* is masculine, whereas *Fringilla* is feminine. If *oregana* is an adjective, as it has generally been construed, it needed to be changed to *oreganus* to agree with *Junco*. But the termination “-a” is ambiguous, and in ambiguous cases the code prescribes that the word be construed as a noun in apposition that remains unchanged regardless of the gender of the genus in which the species or subspecies is classified. This case parallels other similar examples that have been treated inconsistently in recent literature. A comprehensive review of such cases at the level of both species and subspecies is needed.

Articles 31 and 34 of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN 1999) note that adjectival species-group names (both species and subspecies) need to agree in grammatical gender with the generic name with which they are combined, as in Latin and many other languages. Article 30 determines how to tell the gender of a genus. Linnaeus (1758:179) included the name *Fringilla* as a genus in the tenth edition of his *Systema Naturae*, which the code (Article 3) designates as the earliest source of valid publication of scientific names of any animal. *Fringilla* is a feminine Latin word attested in antiquity (Lewis and Short 1879), so according to Article 30 the genus must be treated as feminine.

In the case of *Junco* Wagler, 1831, the gender is masculine. The etymology of *Junco* is unclear, as none is given in the original publication (Wagler 1831:526). *Junco* could be a masculine medieval Latin word, used in the Renaissance-era *Avium Praecipuarum* (Turner 1544) and included in the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Ashdowne et al. 2018). But, according to its glossary, the code considers only classical and medieval Latin as Latin, so this interpretation might not be applicable—the time of transition from medieval to modern Latin is not defined.

Coues (1884) noted that the name could also be derived from the Latin *juncus* (meaning rush, the plant), of which *junco* would be the singular dative or ablative form. Article 11.8 of the code mandates that generic names be in the nominative case, however, which would preclude treatment of *junco* as a Latin word under Article 26. Under this reading, the name may be treated as a neologism that should still be considered masculine under Article 30.2.4. According to either interpretation, *Junco* must be treated as masculine.

John Kirk Townsend made the specific name *oregana* available (meaning first used it correctly in a published article) in his initial description of the taxon in 1837. He wrote the name “*F. [= Fringilla] Oregana*,” as he considered it a full species at the time, for which he used the informal English name “Oregon [*sic*] Snow-Finch” (Townsend 1837:188).

Before touching on the final suffix, I must address the spelling of Oregon as

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Oregan. This rendition might not have been a misspelling. Oregon wasn't formalized as a U.S. state until 1859, and previous spellings varied. Two years after his original publication, Townsend (1839:154) used the spelling *oregona* for the same taxon, which reflects the opposite view.

Many subsequent authors besides Townsend himself, including Audubon (1839:68), Sclater (1856:306, 1857:7), Baird (1858:466), and Baird et al. (1874:584), have changed the name to *oregona*. Audubon (1839:68) cited the original spelling along with his spelling of *Fringilla oregona*, which makes his name an unjustified emendation and a junior homonym under Article 33.2.3. Prevailing usage today, a condition necessary for a change under this subarticle, follows the original spelling as *Junco hyemalis oreganus* (Townsend, 1837) with the correct citation (when a species is reclassified in a different genus or reranked as a subspecies, the citation does not change). The American Ornithologists' Union's (AOU) *Checklist of North American Birds* used *oregonus* in 1886 (p. 274) and 1895 (p. 234), but, following Ridgway (1901:283), subsequently reverted to the original spelling *oreganus* (1902:323, 1910:266, 1931:346, 1957:608–611, 1983:716–717, and 1998:625–626). The original spelling of *oreganus* or *oregana* has been followed by most taxonomies in the past hundred years (see <https://avibase.bsc-eoc.org/avibase.jsp?lang=EN>; Lepage et al. 2014).

Article 32.5.1 deals with incorrect original spellings: "If there is in the original publication itself, without recourse to any external source of information, clear evidence of an inadvertent error, such as a lapsus calami or a copyist's or printer's error, it must be corrected." Townsend's original article in 1837 did not include the spelling "Oregon" and the use of "Oregan Snow-Finch" suggests that this is how Townsend preferred to spell it in 1837. There is no clear evidence of an inadvertent error in the original publication itself, so the spelling of *oregana* cannot be corrected. Later corrections, by Baird and others, might have been possible under earlier understandings of the code or Linnaean classification, but under the current code they are not.

The priority of original spellings does not apply to mandatory corrections, such as for agreement in gender under Articles 31 and 34; here, such as the change from *oregana* to *oreganus* might represent. Sclater (1856:306) was the first to suggest that "*N[iphaea]*, *oregona* [*sic*]" should be combined with *Junco*. (*Niphaea* Audubon, 1839, type species *Fringilla hyemalis* Linnaeus, 1758, is a name that quickly entered the synonymy of *Junco* Wagler, 1831, type species *Junco phaeonotus* Wagler, 1831, and it is no longer used.) Sclater (1857:7) was the first to combine the current specific and generic names formally: "As I have already observed, the name *Junco* ought to be employed instead of *Struthus* for all the three closely allied species of this genus, which will henceforth stand as *J. cinereus*, *J. oregonus*, and *J. hyemalis*." In this nomenclatorial act, Sclater treated *oregana* as an adjective (and misspelled), changing its ending to *-us* to match in gender with *Junco*. This name has been universally applied since.

Why does it matter if *oregana* is an adjective or a noun? Because of Articles 31 and 34. Article 31 states, "A species-group name, if it is or ends in a Latin or latinized adjective or participle in the nominative singular, must agree in gender with the generic name with which it is at any time combined." Article 34.2 goes further: "if the gender ending is incorrect it must be changed accordingly." Both articles have exclusions for nouns, as in Article 34.2.1: "If a species-group name is a noun in apposition its ending need not agree in gender with the generic name with which it is combined and must not be changed to agree in gender with the generic name [Art. 31.2.1]."

If *oregana* is a noun, then the name should now be *Junco hyemalis oregana*; if an adjective, *Junco hyemalis oreganus*. As the word *oreganus* or *oregana* is not found in dictionaries of classical or medieval Latin, its usage under a standard definition is unclear. Normally, in taxonomic nomenclature, the endings *-anus* and *-ana* are clearly adjectival; but because *oregan* already ends in *-an*, the suffix should be *-a* (or the name would be *oreganana*). This ending can be an adjectival ending, as David

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and Gosselin (2011:108) argued for *amazona*, citing Woods (1944), who did not state that the suffix *-a* was used solely for creating adjectives (Woods 1944:XI). The suffix could also be a nominal ending, as in Latin *-a* is also used to make feminine nouns (for example, *equa* from *equus*, “horse”). Without an indication of the author’s intent, there is no way to determine the intended part of speech.

The code has a way of resolving these issues, Article 31.2.2: “Where the author of a species-group name did not indicate whether he or she regarded it as a noun or as an adjective, and where it may be regarded as either and the evidence of usage is not decisive, it is to be treated as a noun in apposition to the name of its genus (the original spelling is to be retained, with gender ending unchanged; see Article 34.2.1).” This subarticle must be applied in the case of *Fringilla oregana*. The first clause is not conclusive. In the text of the original publication, Townsend did not indicate clearly and decisively whether *oregana* was a noun or an adjective. The name may be regarded as either a noun or an adjective: either a noun ending in *-a* (like almost all first declension Latin nouns, such as *puella*), or an adjective ending in *-a* or even *-ana* (like *amica*, or *americana*). The evidence of usage in the original text is not decisive on this point. The English usage of “Oregon Snow-finch” is not helpful, either (What part-of-speech is *Oregan*? Is it a noun in a compound noun phrase, like “Oregon State,” or is it an adjective?)

Since the usage is not decisive, and since it can be considered as either, and since Townsend didn’t put it one way or the other, *oregana* must be considered a noun according to the code. If this is the case, the formal name of this subspecies of the Dark-eyed Junco should be *Junco hyemalis oregana*.

The code states that these changes for grammatical agreement are mandatory. Similar suggestions for other names have been made before, such as for the Kākapo (*Strigops habroptila*; Savage and Digby 2023), the Dwarf Jay (*Cyanolyca nanus*; Jiménez and Cicero 2020) or the Black-capped Chickadee (*Poecile atricapillus*; Chesser et al. 2009: 709), or for many species at the same time (David and Gosselin 2011) and later adopted by taxonomic authorities (e.g., Chesser et al. 2009, 2020). Taxonomy is never complete and some inconsistencies will always occur, as can be seen by proposals to active taxonomic committees (e.g., North American Classification Committee 2026). A broader approach to resolving these ambiguously adjectival geographic specific epithets would be valuable, even though the details of the cases may defy a blanket solution. There are at least 33,684 available scientific names for birds alone, not including synonyms (AviList Core Team 2025). Ideally, taxonomic databases such as ZooBank (ICZN 2026; also administered by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, which maintains the code) could cover not just nomenclatural acts but also provide generic genders and the determinations of parts of speech for species-group names. Since a code is only as useful as its consistent application, we should follow it.

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