

Capitalization: river otter or River Otter?

BC's section's on-line discussion group recently hosted this question from Deb Thiessen of CRD Parks on Vancouver Island:

Does anyone out there know what the etiquette is for using names of birds, animals, plants, etc. within a text? We'd like to know whether to capitalize the name or leave it all in lowercase, e.g.,

In the lagoon the Great Blue Heron is a frequent visitor

or

In the lagoon the great blue heron is a frequent visitor.

Is it capitalized for singular and all lower case for plural, as in: *In the lagoon it is not unusual to see great blue herons?*

To further muddy the waters, does whatever the rule is still apply when you are talking about a mammal such as River Otter (river otter?). And what about plants?

Help! This conversation comes up regularly in our office, with differing results depending on who you talk to or the time of day or whether the sun is peeking through the clouds.

Is there a hard and fast rule that is recognized fairly universally, or is it all done according to preference or some arbitrary decision by some biologist somewhere in academia, or what?

We welcome your thoughts, especially if they solve this issue.

Interpscan editor Sue Ellen Fast responded:

Hi Deb—

As I understand it, the convention for scientific publications is to capitalize the formally recognized common names of anything with a Latin name. Also the whole common name should be used, so Great Blue Heron, not Blue Heron.

However, few of us write for scientific publications. Sometimes the science-trained interpreter demands capitalization, including

me in the past, but now it looks funny to me. It's also awkward to work with, as in your question about more than one Great Blue Heron. I don't usually follow this formal scientific style these days.

Checking for examples on my bookshelves, I see that field guides and museum publications use the capitalized formal scientific style, as do some—but not all—natural histories and how-to books about wildlife gardening and so on. The Stokes guide series use the formal style for birds, but not bugs.

Newspapers and children's magazines don't capitalize, from what I can see in my house.

The writer's style manual I use for Interpscan (*Write Better, Right Now* by Paquet and Paquet) recommends capitalizing parts of Latin names (a whole other topic) and astronomical names such as the Big Dipper. It is silent, however, about common names like the American Dipper (or dipper). My other style manuals say nothing useful either regarding biological names, except for individual names such as Lassie and Elsa, or names with obviously capitalized bits, such as Heerman's gull and German measles.

I think it comes down to reflecting your audience—if you are writing for a scientific audience, then use the formal science style. For other audiences, I'd go with a style that that audience is most comfortable with. Often it's a style you would find in a newspaper, with no capitals.

As with other style issues, there may be various conflicting rules. It's best to adopt one style and stick to it, preferably a Canadian one. This is easy—choose one comprehensive style manual to use as your usual authority. There are several stuffy ones with titles like *Handbook for Writers* and *Canadian Writer's Handbook*. Look

up your topic in the index and do as they say. If I owned the latest edition of the *Council of Biology Editors Style Manual*, I'd check it, but I might not do what it says, because of audience again.

Or, choose a learning-oriented manual with some fun in it! Lists of demon words and Canadian spellings, ways of making sure that your writing is suited to the reading level of your audience, quotes from Star Trek and useful topics such as italics and accent marks found easily in the index—doesn't this sound better?

I use *Write Better, Right Now* because it's usually very helpful, even though it's small and informal in appearance and approach. It even gives me some options if I don't like their recommendation—ah, freedom! It has also been recommended in *Active Voice*, the newsletter of the Editors' Association of Canada. Check it out on-line at www.cornerstoneword.com/wbrn/wbrn.htm.

Krista Zala responded too:

I imagine that the reason Stokes and other guides capitalize birds' common names may be that bird names are standardized across North America, so the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is recognized as the official informal name of *Sphyrapicus varius* all over the continent. Meanwhile, there's much local variation in common names for invertebrates, and so the Pacific littleneck clam is also known as the rock cockle and native littleneck. Such lack of official names for the unsung heroes may mean all will remain uncanceled—until people develop an interest in clamming.

