

The saga behind a slight change of name – now it is *Gyps rueppelli*

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In the middle of the 19th century, Dr Alfred Eduard Brehm journeyed in northeast Africa. In the summer of 1850 and from April 1851, he collected no less than 20 specimens of a new species of vulture (“Geier”) and gave a very good and detailed description of them, with measurements (Brehm 1852). The first of these that he shot, on 13 June 1850, at Khartoum, was named *Vultur Ruppellii* (Brehm 1852: 44) after a mis-identified bird in Eduard Rüppell’s atlas. Regretfully, and later in the same article, Brehm used the different spelling of *V. Rüppelli* (p. 47). This name was in the ‘throw-away’ context of simply seeing a bird perched in a tree in the savanna. Later again (p. 49) he refers to the bird as *Vultur Ruppellii*. He himself then used the name *Gyps ruppellii* in his large work on the natural history of the creation (Brehm 1882; I have

not seen the original German edition). This indicates that Brehm favoured the spelling *ruppellii*, having used it on three out of four occasions.

Immediately, however, it was taken as *Gyps Rüppelli* by Strickland (1855: 10), *Gyps rueppelli* by Sharpe (1874: 9), and *Gyps rueppelli* by Gurney (1884: 9). These were key persons in the naming of birds of prey in the 19th century. Perhaps the first such key person in the 20th century was Harry Kirke Swann. Initially he called the species *Gyps rueppelli* (1920: 4, and in the second revised edition of 1922), but at the beginning of his Monograph it was *Gyps rueppellii* (Swann, 1924: 34, issued as part I on 22 November). Was he following part I of William Lutley Sclater’s list (1924: 47, issued on 30 April), wherein it is named *Gyps rüppellii*? Within 70 years of

the ‘discovery’ of the species, we just about have the full range of options: with/without the umlaut on Rüppell, with/without the substituted ‘e’, and with/without the second (genitive) ‘i’!

The major authorities in the latter part of the 20th century, with taxonomic aspirations, have all favoured *rueppellii*. In chronological order, these are Brown & Amadon (1968: 321), Stresemann & Amadon (1979: 306, and wrongly giving Brehm’s original name as *Rueppellii*), Cramp & Simmons (1980: 81, wrongly stating *rüppellii*), Brown, Urban & Newman (1982: 329, also wrongly giving *Rueppellii* as Brehm’s original name), Amadon & Bull (1988: 310), and Ferguson-Lees & Christie (2001: 428). Were these modern references following Brehm’s first name (p. 44) for his new species rather than his second and alternative spelling (p. 47)? Is it likely that Brehm’s second spelling is simply a ‘typographical’ mistake in the days when copy editing was probably scanty?

In brief, then, in the latter half of the 19th century, *rueppelli* was favoured (except by Brehm himself!), whilst in the 20th century *rueppellii* has been almost universally favoured. Now, early in the 21st century, we are back to

rueppelli (e.g. del Hoyo & Collar 2014). Why? Among the species and subspecies of Old World vultures, there are only two other similar names, being *erlangeri* in the Rüppell’s Griffon and *danieli* in the Cinereous Vulture *Aegypius monachus* (del Hoyo & Collar 2014: 526 and 528). (I have recognised neither of these subspecies, Mundy *et al.* 1992: 102 and 166 respectively). Nevertheless they have been named correctly, as the genitives of Erlanger and Daniel [Meinertzhagen]. And to take two other examples, at random, from the names of raptors, there are Wahlberg’s Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi* and African Hobby Falcon *Falco cucvierii* (sometimes *cucvieri*). These are named after Johan Wahlberg and M.F. Cuvier (Gotch 1981 for the latter).

What do the grammatical rules of the Latin language have to say about genitives (i.e. the possessive declination)? In passing, the Cape Griffon *Gyps coprotheres* early in its career also had its problems and has been *kolbi*, *kolbii* and *kolbei* (Sharpe 1874: 8) after Peter Kolb who had lived at Cape Town in 1705-1713 (Rookmaaker 1989: 29). The correct genitive has only the one ‘i’, and should therefore make up all the above Latin names.

Secondly, what rules does the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) (1999) have?

It comes down to the principle of the ‘First Reviser’ or revisor (Amadon 1955). It was stated by del Hoyo & Collar (2014: 526) that in the case of Rüppell’s Griffon, the “First Reviser” was Dickinson & Remsén (2013: 239). On what ground(s), I wonder, can they be the first reviser(s), 161 years after the naming and scientific description of the species? Indeed, Article 24.2.4 of the Code (1999: 30) allows the original author himself to become *de facto* the First Reviser, if he has used one of the names as valid in a subsequent work, i.e. *ruppellii*.

Article 24.2 allows a subsequent author to choose one name over the other, in the way that Dickinson & Remsén (2013: 239) have chosen/selected *rueppelli* over the alternative. Nevertheless,

Recommendation 24A suggests that this author should select the name which will “serve stability”, which is *rueppellii*! Incidentally, Article 32.5.2.1 states that an umlaut (ü) is to be replaced by *ue*. Further, in Article 31.1.2 the Code states that if a modern personal name is used for a species, then a genitive for a man is indicated by *-i*.

Thus the griffon (vulture) of Rüppell becomes *rueppelli*, and this name now has the correct deletion of the original diacritic mark, and the correct Latin termination. We do not, in fact, need a first reviser, we just need the correct Latin genitive case of a man’s name that is not Latin or latinised. Q.E.D! My friend and herpetologist Dr Don Broadley tells me that the ending *-ii* in his discipline is in the process of being phased out, i.e. the wrong Latin termination is being terminated!

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