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## Short Note

# Shoot the Messenger? How the Secretarybird *Sagittarius serpentarius* got its names (mostly wrong)

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Research into the etymology of various names for the Secretarybird *Sagittarius serpentarius* reveals a comedy of errors from Vosmaer, his French translator, Buffon, Sonnerat, and Miller to Fry. The research suggests that the name *Sagittarius* resulted from a misunderstanding in Holland and that Buffon introduced the name Messenger in error. The Arabic root proposed for the name by Fry in 1977 is historically implausible and linguistically illogical.

## Tire sur le Messenger? D'où le Messenger sagittaire *Sagittarius serpentarius* tient il ses noms (en grande partie erronés)

Des recherches à propos de l'étymologie des différents noms accordés au Messenger sagittaire *Sagittarius serpentarius* révèlent un enchaînement malencontreux d'erreurs depuis Vosmaer, son traducteur français, Buffon, Sonnerat, Miller et jusqu'à Fry. Les recherches suggèrent que le nom Sagittaire serait le résultat d'une mauvaise compréhension en Hollande puis que Buffon introduisit le nom Messenger par erreur. Les origines arabes du nom proposées par Fry en 1977 sont historiquement non plausibles et linguistiquement illogiques.

**Keywords:** Buffon, ornithological etymology, Secretarybird, Vosmaer

As we near the 250th anniversary of the first European description of the Secretarybird *Sagittarius serpentarius*, the large, long-legged predatory bird that hunts small animals on foot, an examination of its early naming and later etymological proposals suggests that a comedy of errors has occurred at different stages. Here I attempt to eliminate some of the most obvious errors and, by retracing the steps of its naming, complement other accounts that offer some useful insights and guesses about these errors (Burton 2014; Urban 2015).

I returned to original descriptions of the Secretarybird as part of a larger inquiry into early South African ornithology. The methods were archival, textual and comparative. The materials examined were all of the early accounts and then the later claim for an Arabic origin for the bird's name.

### 1769: Vosmaer

The first description of the Secretarybird came from Vosmaer in Dutch and French in 1769, based on a live specimen that Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company) official Otto Hemmy had sent from the Cape of Good Hope to Holland in 1767 (Vosmaer 1769a, 1769b; Davids 1996). There are important differences between the Dutch original and the French translation.

The key moment dealing with nomenclature comes in a description of the bird's gait. Here are the two versions followed by my translations:

Zyne gewoone beweeging is, by aanhoudendheid, met zeer groote schreedden gins en weer te loopen; van wege deeze groote stappen die hy maakt, eenigzins overeenkomstig met eenen Boog-Schutter, zal het mogelyk zyn, dat men hem den naam van *Sagittarius* gegeeven heeft, en met welken hy van de Kaap is afgezonden. (Vosmaer 1769a: 4–5)

[His usual movement is to walk incessantly with big strides to and fro. It seems that it is from these large strides that he makes that seem to be like a bowman's that people gave him the name of *Sagittarius*, with which it arrived from the Cape.]

Son mouvement ordinaire est de marcher continuellement à grands pas, tantôt d'un côté, tantôt de l'autre. C'est peut-être à cause de ces grands pas, qui le font en quelque sorte ressembler à un Arbalétrier qui va tirer, qu'on lui a donné le nom de *Sagittaire*, sous lequel il a été envoyé du Cap de Bonne Espérance. (Vosmaer 1769b: 4–5)

[His usual movement is to march incessantly with big strides, first on one side and then on the other. It's perhaps because of these large strides that make him seem in some way like a cross-bow archer who is going to shoot, that he was given the name of *Sagittaire*, under which he was sent from the Cape of Good Hope.]

Vosmaer himself seems at a loss to account for the name. It comes from the Cape already with the name, but he has to speculate on why it was called Sagittarius. This uncertainty leads to key differences between the versions. The logic of Vosmaer's equating the to-and-fro marching of the bird with that of a 'Boog-Schutter' is not clear to the French translator who, in an attempt to make sense of the analogy, turns the bird's gait, implausibly, into that of a cross-bow archer about to fire. The more plausible explanation of the Dutch version lies in the to-and-fro (rather than the French, on one side, then on the other) marching, which may recall an armed sentry or guard patrolling an area up and down. Neither account, tellingly, suggests that the name has anything to do with the feathers on the bird's head resembling arrows or the feathers on them, which, judging from comments from field guides or internet speculation, is the most usual modern attempt to make sense of the analogy with an archer (Evans 2016).

Later on in the description, Vosmaer adds a footnote because a former servant, returning to Holland from the Cape where he has spent many years, visits him while he is writing the account. The man tells him that, contrary to Vosmaer's idea that the bird is rare, it in fact is quite common at the Cape and often domesticated by farmers to keep their homesteads free of pests such as snakes and lizards. At the end of this, he adds a new name:

De gemelde Boeren geeven hem (zekerlyk by verbastering van het woord Sagittarius) den naam van Secretarius. (Vosmaer 1769a: 5)

[These farmers give the bird – surely by corruption of the word Sagittarius – the name of Secretarius.]

Vosmaer's attempt to account for the origin of the word Sagittarius was unclear from the outset and invited, as Buffon's mangling of it will show, further creative flights and errors. Should it not have been clear to Vosmaer, after all, that the to-and-fro of the bird he observed may have arisen because it was in captivity and pacing in frustration, not out of any natural habit?

#### 1771: Edwards

In the *Philosophical Transactions* of 1771, George Edwards reported that Sir Charles Raymond, First Baronet (1713–1788) of Valentine House, had an unknown bird he had brought from the East Indies (Edwards 1771). He attempted a description but did not provide a name. An editorial footnote, however, referred to Vosmaer's article and identified the bird as the Sagittarius.

#### 1776: Sonnerat

Sonnerat's account of the bird as originating in the Philippines, although he says he also saw it at the Cape, is widely assumed to be incorrect (Sonnerat 1776: 87–89). He may have seen a captive bird. His illustration is, as most commentators have observed, very inaccurate.

#### 1777–1782: Gordon and Levaillant

In Robert Gordon's record of his second voyage into the Cape interior, he recorded, on 28 November 1777, 'zag ook twe secretarissen' (Gordon 1777; Rookmaaker 1989). Gordon had visited Vosmaer in Holland in 1774 and discussed African animals with him (Cullinan 1992). If any of the early Dutch explorers would have been likely to know of the name Sagittarius or found it persuasive, it would surely have been Gordon.

Gordon later gave his portfolio of bird illustrations to French ornithologist François Levaillant for annotation. Though the illustrations and Gordon's annotation probably pre-date Buffon's comments, Levaillant would have added his comments during his visit to the Cape, probably in 1781 or 1782. On the illustration of the Secretarybird, Gordon simply marked Secretaris and Levaillant below added his note, Le Secrétaire (the image can be seen here: <https://www.robertjacobgordon.nl/drawings/rp-t-1914-17-247>). So, even though Levaillant would later prefer the traditional indigenous name of snake-eater in his French choice of Le Mangeur de Serpents, he knew that the bird was called Secretaris and gave the French equivalent.

#### 1779: Miller

The binomial rule in zoology gives pride of place to Miller, who named the Secretarybird he painted, without any additional description, *Falco serpentarius* (Miller 1779: Plate 28). He attempted a link to Linnaean classification, but his attempt at classification was confusing and perhaps confused – Miller placed the bird as belonging to the bird Genus 44, *Lanius*, as Species number one. As the bird was named *Falco* Miller presumably meant Order 42, but Linnaeus had not yet classified the bird in his 12th edition. After Miller's classification, he gave the origin as the Cape of Good Hope.

#### 1780: Buffon

Buffon's account was probably the most influential account before Levaillant's, but in many ways the most misleading (Buffon 1780: 30–39). He named the bird Le Secrétaire ou Le Messenger (messenger) and surmised (surely correctly) that it was named Secretary because of the plumes above the head. In his account he quoted a lengthy passage from one of his correspondents who had visited the Cape – the Viscomte de Querhoënt. The latter described the bird's hunting methods, particularly the use of the wing in fighting snakes, which many later writers drew on. Buffon's use of Querhoënt is particularly significant as his visit to the Cape took place in the early 1770s – probably in 1774.

Some of Querhoënt's correspondence with Buffon from the Cape in 1774 is in the Paris Natural History Museum but the section regarding the Secretarybird is not there (Buffon and Querhoënt 1774–1781; Fauvelle-Aymar 2002). Querhoënt calls the bird *Le Secrétaire*. After quoting Querhoënt's description, Buffon turned to Vosmaer's original work and then summarised Sonnerat, pointing to the errors in his illustration.

Buffon claimed to draw the name *Message* directly from Vosmaer and put the passage about the bird's gait (cited in the French translation of Vosmaer given earlier) in quotation marks, simply substituting 'messenger' for 'Sagittaire!' (Buffon 1780: 35). Once again, we see a European theorist struggling to make sense of the name and working by analogy and guesswork. Perhaps Buffon forgot his classical references and thought *Sagittarius*, rather than *Hermes*, was the messenger of the gods. However, it seems more likely that he simply over-rode one illogicality by turning the Secretarybird's walk into a kind of postman delivery march.

The name *Message* has survived in the French common name for the Secretarybird, *Message sagittaire*. However, the usage led to further errors and distortions elsewhere – as in an American dictionary explanation that the name arises from the Secretarybird's very fast flight (Webster 1913).

Buffon returned to the name *Sagittarius* and sought to cover his tracks by adding two further distortions. First, he suggested that the name *Sagittaire* was Vosmaer's choice ('qu'il lui applique' – or that he, Vosmaer, applies to him) and then said that Vosmaer named the bird the archer because of its habit of throwing straws into the air – presumably like arrows (Buffon 1780: 35). Vosmaer, of course, insisted that he inherited the name and gave a different reason for the naming.

### 1783: Hermann

The taxonomically correct generic name for this species was assigned by Johann Hermann a few years after Buffon (Hermann 1783). Hermann simply followed Buffon's suggestion that the bird was somewhere between cranes and raptors (pp 136, 168) and so assigned it a specific place on his charts of species relationships (pp 165, 235). He did not mention the name *Secretarius* at all so did not affect the naming choice in any way.

### 1785: Sparrman

Sparrman gave a highly derivative account of the Secretarybird, referring to Vosmaer, citing some of Querhoënt's observations, and calling it *Falco serpentarius*. There is one intriguing error or interpretive jump in his account, both in French and English. In English he called it 'the secretaries bird' and in French 'l'Oiseau des secretaries' or bird belonging to the secretaries (Sparrman and Forster 1785: 153–155).

### 1977: Fry

In 1977, CH Fry wrote a letter to *Ibis* in which he offered an intriguing new theory of the origin of Secretarybird – in

an Arabic phrase 'saqr et-tair' (Fry 1977). Many current accounts of the origin of the name, including the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, dutifully repeat this possibility (Thiollay et al. 1994), although it is etymologically highly unlikely, historically inaccurate and inherently implausible.

Fry was alerted to this possibility by a correspondent, Mr Geoffrey Drake, who claimed that the phrase in Arabic meant 'Hawk of the semi-desert' and that he had heard the phrase in Sudan. Fry, however, pointed out that 'semi-desert' for 'tair' was incorrect and that 'tair' more accurately meant bird or flight, something that surely casts doubt on the linguistic expertise and reliability of Drake. Nor could Fry or his researchers find any trace of the phrase in any dictionary, whereas many other far more descriptive and poetic terms ('Satan's horse', for example) were available. The boring redundancy of 'the falcon bird' or 'falcon that flies' should surely be enough to disqualify this origin on aesthetic grounds alone, particularly when what distinguishes the Secretarybird is its movement on the ground. Burton goes further to argue that his Arabic expert suggested that the phrase should mean the nonsensical 'the falcon of the bird' and is linguistically implausible (Burton 2014).

There is an additional flaw in the linguistic equivalence Fry and Drake found. Most of the European sources were Dutch and 'saqr et tair' does not sound like *Secretaris* or *Secretarius*. So Fry has to claim that via a French or English error in European menageries, people such as Querhoënt in the Cape in the early 1770s or Gordon in the Cape in 1777 had already imported and transformed this error.

However, there were far more serious flaws and simple errors and omissions in the argument when Fry turned to historical speculation. Fry argues that the Secretarybirds in European menageries in the 1770s 'as likely as not' came from 'Arabs trading through the Red Sea or down the Nile'. But as we have seen, every written account gave a different source: the Cape or the East Indies via the Cape. The bird Edwards described in 1771 had not picked up any Arabic-inspired name and there is no evidence that any other captive bird had. Even Miller added, after his Linnaean inaccuracy, originally from the Cape of Good Hope.

Nor should it be forgotten that the original name from the Dutch was in French usage by 1769 through the translation of Vosmaer. Sonnerat explicitly referred to the bird as one he had seen when he passed through the Cape, so Fry's claim that he did not know the true derivation is mistaken. When Miller called it *Falco serpentarius* in 1779, he did not need the Arabs to tell him that the bird killed snakes as this had been well established in the account of Vosmaer and seemed to be more widely known through accounts such as that of Querhoënt.

Most of the early accounts reveal metaphorical jumps to try to account for a name – from the sentry patrolling to the cross-bow archer taking position to the bird throwing straws in the air. These uncertainties suggest that the secret of the *Sagittaire's* meaning may be hidden in Vosmaer's original account.

If we return to Vosmaer's intuition about a confusion of names, it seems logical to suggest quite the reverse of what he claimed when he thought that *Secretarius* was a local

corruption of Sagittarius. The logical conclusion is surely that the corruption that occurred was that the bird named Secretarius in Africa had its name corrupted or changed to Sagittarius en route to Holland – presumably someone misheard or mistranscribed the name. To assume this, we have to have one error rather than a whole host of them in having Sagittarius changed to Secretarius across a whole colony. Vosmaer got stuck on the name he read or heard first, instead of considering the report from the old servant as the definitive one and questioning the provenance he had for the name.

How likely, after all, was it that frontier farmers would have used a complex classical name for the bird instead of something simple such as 'Boog-Schutter'? The analogies some have tried to find with feathers resembling archers' arrows were already anachronistic in an era when frontier farmers used firearms.

As for the modern claim of an alternative origin for the name – there is, as argued above, not one shred of evidence for Fry's or Drake's claim as opposed to the ample record of the Dutch colonial origin of the name and its passage into wider European usage (Rookmaaker 1989). This piece of speculation should be gently forgotten.

What this return to the sources has revealed is a series of errors and creative misinterpretations from founding figures of European natural history. In particular, it suggests that Vosmaer erred in sticking to the name Sagittarius and that this led to a series of further errors.

If Vosmaer made an original error in hearing or understanding Sagittarius instead of Secretarius, his resistance to the account of the man from the field seems typical of the central classifier remaining blind to the possibility of error on his account and attributing it instead to the people in the field. In the case of Buffon, we see the authority simply overwriting and overriding other reports in a case of interpretive hubris – and that his interpretive power still holds sway, for example, in the French name of the bird, *Messenger sagittaire* (a name which may well be a compound error).

Ornithologists have been tempted, and at times misled, by metaphors and etymological possibilities in names, so a scrupulous concern with the historical record is a first duty that has often been neglected, even in as iconic a bird as the Secretarybird. After a quarter of a millennium, that record at least should be set straight.

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