

**Who speaks for the birds? Fewer birders, after Audubon naming controversy.
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Chicagoans take their birds seriously. We loved the stories of Monty and Rose, the piping plovers whose lakefront romance became the talk of the town, and we appreciate the serious ornithology of the Lincoln Park Zoo, among other standout local research institutions.

Plans to build a Carvana car tower in Skokie recently ran afoul of bird lovers who saw it as a threat to feathered friends in a nearby forest preserve. Bird lovers spoke up when sites for the new casino were being vetted. And Chicago and Cook County have pioneered “lights out” programs and pushed bird-friendly designs to cut down on window collisions and other hazards facing birds, especially during migration seasons.

Those who love birds will immediately recognize the name of the National Audubon Society, among the world’s biggest and best-known charities dedicated to helping winged creatures and preserving their habitats. Audubon has hundreds of local chapters, including in Chicago.

Well, it did, anyway.

A backlash has emerged over the racist past of John James Audubon, namesake of the big bird organization. As a pioneering scientist and illustrator, Audubon single-handedly popularized the American bird movement that lives on today. He died in 1851, and when the society got started in 1905, naming it after America’s revered birdman made sense.

Times have changed, and 170 years after his death, Audubon is being held to account for being an enslaver. When the social justice movement gathered steam after the police killing of George Floyd in 2020, the Audubon Society came under pressure to scrap its name.

Anyone who wants a bird’s-eye view of what a mess can ensue when an organization ties itself in knots trying to appease opposing factions will appreciate the Audubon Society’s predicament. The group’s leaders failed to recognize how nothing short of repudiating Audubon entirely would satisfy those calling for his long-dead head.

At the same time, the name transcended the person many generations ago, and bird-loving donors give hundreds of millions to the Audubon Society — not the Anti-Audubon Society or the No-Name Society.

Evidently realizing that it would lose funding and undermine its important conservation mission if it adopted a name no one would recognize, the organization tried to kill two birds with one stone. It voted to keep its name, while promising to divert \$25 million from its core activities to promote diversity.

Encouraging diversity in birding is a worthwhile goal, but that decision did nothing to pacify the anti-Audubon faction — and the organization has been left severely weakened. Over the course of the battle, its top executive departed, several board members resigned, donors had their feathers ruffled, angry employees formed a labor organization they dubbed the “Bird Union” and, most troubling of all, a flock of local chapters decided to ignore the board’s decision and rename themselves something else, minus Audubon.

Chicago is among that handful of local chapters changing their names. Changing the name to what, we don’t know. As of earlier this month, “Birds Connect Chicago” was the leading contender, though it is guaranteed to elicit a “Huh?” from would-be donors, and confusion from those who think the acronym BCC stands for blind carbon copy, not birds.

The Chicago chapter’s leadership concedes that it will take a big financial hit from dumping Audubon, saying, “We realize that many financial bequests come to Audubon on the strength of its name alone. Our chapter

has benefited enormously from this support. However, we are willing to accept negative financial consequences in the name of creating more welcoming and inclusive spaces for our members.”

Our question: What about the birds?

Lost in this flurry of politicking is the fact that birds are in big trouble. Hazards ranging from roaming cats and city lights to loss of habitat, pollution and climate change have killed off several billion birds in North America since 1970. Birds are an early warning sign of environmental catastrophe, and their plunging numbers amount to a more compelling call to action, in our view, than fighting over the name Audubon.

More broadly, those looking for easy answers about changing historical names will be disappointed. While this page has supported many name changes, like that of the pro football team egregiously known as the Washington Redskins, we’ve also encouraged concerned individuals to keep their heads in these debates.

The achievements of influential historical figures deserve more consideration than one-dimensional litmus tests. Among the Founding Fathers, for instance, were some who enslaved people. Rather than campaigning to rename the nation’s capital, its tallest monument and a large state, it would be wiser to resist judging the personal life of George Washington – or Audubon – against contemporary standards.

Washington now means something far beyond its namesake’s personal history and we’d argue that Audubon clearly now does, too. The debate about the name was rightly rigorous and Audubon’s racist past should be acknowledged and repudiated; that said, Audubon does not point to, nor draw from, the personal history of its founder, nor does it even use his first name. Rather, it has taken full control of that single word and turned into an instantly recognizable moniker of support for birds.

Going against the national board and confusing national donors will only turn something as uncontroversial as helping our feathered friends into yet another partisan flashpoint.