



## Robins, robins, robins

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Since Pokémon is a recurrent topic on this journal, I would like to call your attention to this little fellow: the fletchling.



Fletchling (yayakoma, in Japanese), as it appears in official Pokémon artwork.

Fletchling is a tiny normal/flying-type robin pokémon with an orange head and grey body. Both Pokédex and Bulbapedia tell us that they sing beautifully, send signs using chirps and tail movements and are also merciless to intruders in their territory. It evolves to a fire/flying peregrine falcon (how a robin becomes a falcon is a topic for further discussion) that is a very common sight in competitions.

Back to fletchling. Even though I like all sorts of birds (I am an ornithologist after all), we always have our favorites; mine is the robin. And so, the tiny robin fletchling became my all-time-favorite pokémon. Now let us take a look at the robin I find in my garden.



European robin (*Erithacus rubecula*). Could you really be a fletchling?

Well, they look somewhat similar, but the color differs. Could my garden robin and fletchling be the same thing then? Are there any other robins outta there?



Teen Titans Go! Image taken from:  
[http://www.cartoonnetwork.com/tv\\_shows/teen-titans-go/characters/index.html](http://www.cartoonnetwork.com/tv_shows/teen-titans-go/characters/index.html)

No no, I meant bird robins.



American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). Image taken from: Wikimedia Commons.



Japanese robin (*Erithacus akahige*). Image taken from: Wikimedia Commons.

So it is finally clear that fletchling was based on the Japanese robin and not on the European one from my garden (even though the entire Pokémon XY games supposedly been based on France – good job, Game Freak Inc.).

Now let us take a closer look at the bird robins (please refer to the figures above). We can see that the Japanese and European robins are very similar between themselves, especially when you compare them to the American and Australian robins (see figure below). This is expected, since the former share the same genus (*Erithacus*), meaning that they are more closely related. That is why they are so similar in appearance despite the difference in color. There is yet another *Erithacus* robin in Japan which has even more distinct plumage color (the Ryukyu robin, see figure below), but that is still very similar in shape to the European and Japanese robins.



Ryukyu robin (*Erithacus komadori*). Image taken from: Wikimedia Commons.

American robins, on the other hand, are much more different. They belong to another genus (*Turdus*), which also includes blackbirds, song thrushes and fieldfares. As such, they are only distantly related to the species belonging to *Erithacus*. Actually, *Turdus* might even belong to a completely different family – this is a hotly debated topic in ornithological circles, but I will not dwell on it.



Australian robins (*Petroica rosea*) are part yet another very distinct group. Image taken from: Wikimedia Commons.

So why we call all these different birds “robins”?

Robin is a popular English name to refer to passerines with red breast. The first one to be named as such was the European robin and the name was later on “exported” by colonizers and travelers for the birds in other continents. In other languages, the red breast feature of the European robin is always the focus: “Rotkehlchen” (German), “pisco-de-peito-ruivo” (Portuguese), “rouge-gorge familier” (French), “petirrojo” (Spanish), “pettirosso” (Italian) etc. Folklore says the red breast was earned by the

brave small European robin as a token for its heroic acts (Greenoak, 1997).

European/Japanese and American/Australian robins all share the red breast feature, being, thus, all called “robins”. However, as we saw, one pair is not closely related to the other – they do not share the same genus. This is because their popular name is not based on any evidence of how closely related they are. Popular names are just useful tools for people’s everyday life. Scientific names, however, are more than that. As we saw, color is not the only characteristic that make a bird a *Turdus* or an *Erithacus* – The other Japanese robin (the Ryukyu robin) does not even have an orange breast; what makes it an *Erithacus* is its body shape, skeleton, anatomy etc. Giving a name is not an easy matter in science (this branch of Biology is called Taxonomy, by the way). The act of classifying and naming a species is based on studies that analyze the morphology and even the DNA of living beings to decide who is more related to whom (and therefore belong to the same genus or family). Therefore, scientific names also contains information on the relationship between species and will never confuse someone as popular names like “robin” do.

## REFERENCES

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