The birds of James Bond

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“The name is Bond, James Bond.”

This particular British Secret Service agent is known worldwide through numerous books, comics, videogames and, of course, films. James Bond was created by Ian Fleming and the series now outlives its creator, continuing to grow on a somewhat constant rate. Fleming’s superspy character was based on many people he met during the time he spent serving in the British Naval Intelligence Division during World War II. In his own words, James Bond "was a compound of all the secret agents and commando types I met during the war".

But what few know is where the name comes from. Actually, it was not invented by Fleming for the character; instead, it was borrowed from a real person. So who was the original James Bond and how Fleming came to know him and to borrow his name?

LICENSE TO MAP

James Bond was born in Philadelphia on 4 January 1900. After his mother’s death during his teens, in 1914, he moved with his father to England, going to Cambridge University and receiving his degree in 1922. Back in Philadelphia, after less than three years working for a banking firm, his love of natural history led him to join an expedition of the ANSP (Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia) to the lower Amazon River in Brazil. His father, Francis E. Bond, who led an ANSP expedition (when James was 11) to the Orinoco Delta, perhaps influenced James’ decision, as well as his interest in the natural sciences.

James Bond, in 1974. Photo taken at the ANSP by Jerry Freilich. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

After the expedition to the Amazon, James Bond became a true ornithologist (see Box 1 for a glossary) and curator of the ANSP and started to publish many scientific papers on the South
American birds. Nevertheless, he soon decided that the focus of his studies would be the Caribbean birds and this became his life’s work. He spent the next decades travelling through the Caribbean islands and studying their avifauna. The main result of his work in the region was the book “Birds of the West Indies” (1936), containing a scientific account (with descriptions, habits, geographic distribution etc.) of all the known species from the islands. The book was renamed “Field Guide of Birds of the West Indies” on its second edition (1947), but reverted to the original name on the third edition (1961). Also, from the third edition onwards, the book featured color plates of the birds (by Don R. Eckelberry) and more simplified descriptions. This made the book more similar to modern field guides, making it a must for scientists and birdwatchers alike. After the final edition (1985), Bond kept the book updated via a series of 27 supplements. He finished revising a sixth edition shortly before his death (on 14 February 1989, after a years-long fight with cancer).

Box 1. Glossary

Alfred Russel Wallace: Wallace (1823–1913) was a British naturalist known for independently conceiving the theory of evolution through natural selection. His work was published together with Charles Darwin’s writings in 1858, one year before the latter published *On the Origin of Species*. Wallace, an expert on the study of the geographical distribution of animal species, is considered the "father of Biogeography".

Avifauna: The group birds inhabiting a given region.

Biogeography: Branch of Biology that studies the distribution of species in geographic space and through geological time.

Biogeographic boundary: A line that divides two faunal or floral biogeographical zones. This means that the animals or plants of one zone are completely different (or nearly so) from those of the other zone, indicating that they have distinct origins. The most famous of these boundaries is Wallace’s Line (proposed by Alfred Russel Wallace), that runs through Indonesia separating the Southeast Asian and Australian types of fauna.

Birdwatcher: Birdwatching, or birding, is the observation of bird wildlife as a recreational activity. A birdwatcher might also be engaged in more serious projects, such as monitoring bird populations or providing environmental education.

Curator: The person who manages a museum collection. In James Bond’s case, the ornithological collection of the ANSP.

David Lack: (1910–1973) Renowned British evolutionary biologist, famous for his work on Darwin’s finches on the Galapagos.

Endangered species: A species which is in danger of becoming extinct.

Endemic species: A species that is only found in a specific geographic location, such as an island, province or any other defined (and usually relatively small) zone. For instance, the bird species *Regulus madeirensis* (popularly known as Madeira firecrest) is only found on Madeira Island. The extreme opposite of endemism is a cosmopolitan distribution, meaning that the species can be found across all or most of the world, such as house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and humans.

Hybrid zone: A region where two populations (subspecies) of a species or two distinct species coexist and cross-fertilize, giving birth to hybrid offspring.

Introduced species: A species living outside its native distributional range, brought there (intentionally or not) by humans.

Mary Bond: Mary Fanning Wickham Porcher Lewis (1898–1997) married James Bond in 1953. By that time, she was already a known poet and novelist. She also wrote memoirs of her life with her James, which was her second husband.

Ornithologist: A person who studies Ornithology, the branch of Biology devoted to the study of birds.

West Indies: The West Indies is a region including the islands of the Antilles and the Lucayan (or Bahamas) Archipelago. It received this name to distinguish it from the actual Indies (South and Southeast Asia) after the voyages of Christopher Columbus.
From all the islands that James Bond visited, perhaps the one that most fascinated him was Jamaica, where he realized that the native avifauna was derived from North America, and not from South America as was previously supposed. This kind of study is part of the discipline known as Biogeography and led Bond, in 1971, to establish a biogeographic boundary between the Lesser Antilles and Tobago. This line separates two zones, the West Indies and South America, each with its own type of avifauna. This later led David Lack to propose, in 1973, the name “Bond's Line” for this boundary.
Besides the books, Bond published more than 100 scientific papers and was awarded many medals and honors throughout his career. He is known today as the father or Caribbean ornithology. What he did not expect though, was the other Bond, which appeared in Jamaica of all places, and caused him a certain deal of consternation.

GOLDENEYE

It was only in 1960–1961 that Bond discovered his fictional namesake from Ian Fleming’s novels, after several novels had already been published (the first one, “Cassino Royale”, dates from 1953). This led his wife Mary to write the book “How 007 Got His Name” (published in 1966). In this book, she tells how she jokingly wrote a letter to Fleming saying that he had “brazenly taken the name of a real human being for your rascal!”

Fleming was a British novelist and spent a couple of months every year in his estate (named Goldeneye) on Oracabessa Bay, on the northern coast of Jamaica. He was interested in the Jamaican wildlife and had a growing collection of book on shells, birds, fish and flora. Also, as any keen birdwatcher on the Caribbean, Fleming used the “Field Guide of Birds of the West Indies” (he had the 2nd edition, from 1947) and was thus very familiar with the name James Bond. On his reply to Mary’s letter, he explained that he “was determined that my secret agent should be as anonymous a personality as possible. (…) At this time one of my bibles was, and still is, Birds of the West Indies by James Bond, and it struck me that this name, brief, unromantic and yet very masculine, was just what I needed and so James Bond II was born.” On a later interview, Fleming explained further his choice of name: “I wanted the simplest, dullest, plainest-sounding name I could find, ‘James Bond’ was much better than something more interesting, like ‘Peregrine Carruthers’. Exotic things would happen to and around him, but he would be a neutral figure – an anonymous, blunt instrument wielded by a government department.”

On that letter to Mary, Fleming added that in return for using the name he could offer “your James Bond unlimited use of the name Ian Fleming for any purpose he may think fit. Perhaps one day he will discover some particularly horrible species of bird which he would like to christen in an insulting fashion.” This never happened though. Finally, Fleming also invited the Bonds to visit him in Jamaica. This happened in 1964, when the Bonds were there researching and paid a surprise visit to Fleming. This was shortly before the novelist’s death six months later, and luckily, this one-time meeting was captured in video for a future documentary. At first, Fleming was suspicious of Bond’s identity and asked him to identify some birds. Bond, of course, passed the test with flying colors and Fleming had the happiest day of the rest of his life.
FROM JAMAICA WITH LOVE

Jamaica, despite being a rather small country, has a very diverse avifauna. There are circa 320 bird species living in Jamaica, including migrants. From these, 28 are endemic species, 12 are endangered and 14 are introduced. Some of these species have fascinated James Bond, Ian Fleming and countless other tourists and birdwatchers. Moreover, since Ian Fleming was such a keen birdwatcher, birds sometimes featured in his stories (and later in the films), and a collection of bird trivia can be found in Box 2 further below.

We will now briefly introduce some of the more interesting Jamaican birds and explore a little bit of their natural history and even folklore.

Red-Billed Streamertail (*Trochilus polytmus*)

The red-billed streamertail, also known as doctor bird or scissortail hummingbird, appears in Fleming’s short story “For Your Eyes Only” (1960). The first lines of the story are: "The most beautiful bird in Jamaica, and some say the most beautiful bird in the world, is the streamer-tail or doctor humming-bird." It is very hard to crown a “most beautiful” bird, but the red-billed streamertail is indeed remarkable. The feathers on the male’s tail (the “streamers”) are longer than their actual body and make a humming sound during flight. James Bond (the ornithologist) seems to agree; well, partially, at least: his book says that the “adult male is the most spectacular West Indian hummingbird”.

This species is the most abundant and widespread bird in Jamaica and was actually selected as the country’s national bird. Frederic G. Cassidy (1962–2000), who studied the evolution of the English language in Jamaica, says that the name doctor bird comes from the way the animals spear the flowers with their beaks to feed. Still, the term “doctor” also carries a superstitious overtone (as in “witch-doctor”) and Cassidy notes that natives referred to these hummingbirds as “god birds”.

![Male and female Red-Billed Streamertail (*Trochilus polytmus*)](Source: Wikimedia Commons.)
Jamaican Tody (Todus todus)
The todies belong to the order Coraciiformes, a group that also includes kingfishers, rollers and bee-eaters. The Jamaican tody was at first believed to be a species of hummingbird. Later, it received the name of robin, due to its small size and round appearance. This early folk name still survives in Jamaica as robin red-breas’, an allusion to the bird’s red colored patch below the beak and a copy of the English name of another bird. Robin redbreast is the old name of the European robin (Erithacus rubecula), a totally unrelated species.

The Jamaican tody is a tiny bird that feeds on insects and fruits, nesting in excavated burrows. James Bond was especially interested in the nesting behavior of birds and studied this topic at length. He chose the Jamaican tody as the cover of the first edition of “Birds of the West Indies” (1936). It has a very small geographic distribution and its population seems to be steadily decreasing in the last decade.

Jamaican Poorwill (Siphonorhis americana)
Also known as Jamaican pauraque, this nocturnal bird is a species of nightjar, of the family Caprimulgidae. The family name comes from the Latin caprimulgus (goatsucker) and reflects the absurd folk “lore” that these birds sucked milk from goats.

Very little is known about the Jamaican poorwill – it had been extinct long before Bond’s studies, since 1859. It was driven to extinction by introduced rats and mongooses, alongside the usual human-caused habitat destruction. Since the birds nest on the ground, their eggs are easy prey for these introduced mammals. Nevertheless, there are some recent (1998) records of caprimulgids from the regions of the Milk River and the Hellshire Hills in the country, but they remain unconfirmed. Thus, a very small population of poorwills might still exist in these remote regions. Curiously, Bond had also previously alluded to the possibility of a surviving population of these birds on the semi-arid Hellshire Hills.

Jamaican Blackbird (Nesopsar nigerrimus)
The Jamaican blackbird (family Icteridae) is the only species in its genus and all of its names are rather misleading. Firstly, it is not an actual

The Jamaican Tody, Todus todus. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)
The Jamaican poorwill, Siphonorhis americana. (Source: Rothschild, 1907.)

The Jamaican Blackbird, Nesopsar nigerrimus. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)
blackbird (*Turdus merula*, family Turdidae), which is a species of thrush. Nevertheless, the family Icteridae is popularly known as “New World blackbirds”, so we can let this one slip. As for the scientific name, the genus name comes from the Greek *neso* (island) and *psar* (starling) and, as one might guess, this bird is completely unrelated to true starlings (family Sturnidae). Finally, the specific epithet (see Salvador, 2014, for a crash course in species’ scientific names) means simply “very black”, which might not be so descriptive of a “blackbird” after all.

The Jamaican blackbird, *Nesopsar nigerrimus*. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

Nevertheless, a local Jamaican popular name for this bird is “wild-pine sergeant” and is more accurate than the other names. These birds feed on insects they find in tree bark or bromeliads (locally known as “wild-pines”) and are adapted to climbing trees, similar to woodpeckers. They inhabit the montane forests of Jamaica and are arranged in pairs of birds, each pair occupying a vast territory. The severe deforestation caused by mining, forestry, charcoal production and agriculture has led to an extreme habitat loss incompatible with the blackbirds’ large territories. The species is thus considered endangered, but only some very shy efforts have been made towards its preservation.

Sad Flycatcher (*Myiarchus barbirostris*)

The sad flycatcher (together with the lesser Antillean pewee, *Contopus latirostris*) is commonly called little Tom-fool by the Jamaican people, for its habit of refusing to fly away when threatened. This flycatcher species inhabits the forests of Jamaica and, as their name imply, feed on insects. In fact, the genus name comes from the Greek *muia* (fly) and *archos* (ruler), while the specific epithet refers to the presence of rictal bristles. These bristles are modified feathers (that look like mammals’ whiskers) projecting from the beak; they not only provide tactile feedback (as whiskers do), but also supposedly protect the birds’ eyes as they consumes their wriggly insect prey.

The sad flycatcher, *Myiarchus barbirostris*. (Source: Wikimedia Commons.)

To avoid confusion, we must note here that the sad flycatcher is part of the group known as “New World flycatchers” or “tyrant flycatchers”
(the family Tyrannidae). The “Old World flycatchers” belong to another family, Muscicapidae, which is only distantly related to the Tyrannidae.

**Jamaican Crow (Corvus jamaicensis)**

This bird is locally known as “jabbering crow” or “gabbling crow”, for it can produce a variety of jabbering sounds (besides the common “caw” of crows). Their incessant jabbering may also sound like indistinct human languages and, to the British, rather like Welsh people, which led to the birds being nicknamed “Welshmen” in a typical bout of Brit humor.

The Jamaican crows live mainly in the country’s uplands, but may come down to the lowlands during the dry season. They feed mainly on fruit and invertebrates, but may occasionally eat other birds’ eggs and nestlings.

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**YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE**

Bond’s work with the Caribbean avifauna set the basis for ornithology in the region and most of his insights have been continuously proved accurate. As such, his influence in science shall remain relevant for a long time to come. Well, at least until humans have extinguished all the bird species in the region – unfortunately, birds live only once and Jamaica has already lost three of its endemic species. Meanwhile, the other Bond also remain a relevant figure in popular culture and imagination, with his over-the-top stories, exotic locations, strange villains, Bond girls, fancy suits, weaponized cars and a number of crazy gadgets. James Bond has thus the (somewhat dubious) honor of having his name
twice immortalized in History, as a brilliant ornithologist and as a womanizing superspy. (We believe the latter is better remembered than the former though.)

But for those of you thinking that a birder’s life is much duller than a spy’s life, some words from the naturalist and writer Alexander F. Skutch (1904–2004) might change your mind or at the very least make you revisit your beliefs: “our quest of them [birds] takes us to the fairest places; to find them and uncover some of their well-guarded secrets we exert ourselves greatly and live intensely.”

REFERENCES


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