

A Pheasant by Any Other Name: Why Do We Call a Pheasant a Pheasant?

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How members of the animal kingdom, including pheasants, received their common names occupies too much space in my head. Why do we, speakers of the English language, call a pheasant a pheasant? Who decided? Who figured out its proper spelling? And so on.

Common names can have multiple birth stories. A few years ago, I walked to work by a small tree growing near a driveway by our university library. (It thrived until a plumber ran over it with his service truck.) My dad, a longtime woodworker, recognized it by its common name: a judas tree.

The Latin name for the tree is *Cercis canadensis*. This one, before its untimely introduction to an F150, was perhaps 30 feet high and about 25 years old. Notable for its bright pink flowers in the spring, *Cercis* comes from the Greek *kerkis*, which means shuttle, as in the shuttle a weaver uses for threading on a loom. Apparently, judas' seed pods reminded the Swedish master classifier Carl Linnaeus of a weaver's shuttle when he labeled it back in 1753.

But why is it commonly known as the judas tree? (It is also called the eastern redbud.) For four reasons, three of which are related. First, and most obvious, is the notion that this is the tree species Judas, the Biblical betrayer of Jesus, hung himself from. Second, the three-inch seed pods dropping from the tree remind onlookers of a hanging person. Third, if the spring weather cooperates, the tree blooms on Easter Sunday, or at least in the Easter season, when Jesus rises.

The fourth explanation, and perhaps the most accurate one although boring, is that the region called Judea, particularly in its French translation, sounds kind of like "Judas," and that's from where the tree originates.

Since pheasants also occupy a large space in my brain, I have been thinking about ancient sources that talk about them. Digging from English to French to Greek to Latin, I ended up in the Caucasus Mountains, at a river and a small village. (There was also a brief path through Eastern Asia.)

The river is now called the Rioni, in modern Georgia near the Turkish border, which doesn't help us until we discover that it was once known as the Phasis River, and it ran near an ancient town of the same name. A native species of pheasants lived there, probably black-necked, and possibly originated from that region (the pheasant is the national bird of Georgia) before spreading elsewhere, including Greece. The Greeks, literal as they were, named the bird *phaisanos*, which roughly translates into "bird of Phasis."

Linnaeus, who loved his Latin, named the family *Phasianidae* in 1758, while the Spanish used “faisan,” perhaps following the French, who had dropped the “ph” in *phaisanos* for an “f.” The French proclivity to do things their own way, including spelling, was part of a long history of creative nomenclature relating to our game bird. A few examples from old texts include:

- The Italian scholar Polydore Virgil, writing from England in 1533: “Of wilde burdes these are the most delicate: partriches, pheasaunts, quayles, owlses, thrushes, and larkes.” There’s a man who liked his phonics.
- The master chef of King Richard II boiled “fesant” along with “Ptruch,” which sounds like someone spitting into a brass pot.
- In the reign of noted gastronome King Henry VIII, his table was set with “fesauntys” although they were sometimes spelled “fesands.” Note the plural. Weighing in at a crisp 400 pounds, Henry ate more than one bird at a time.
- In Scotland, where the English language is often stretched to its verbal limits, the bird was a “phesant” or “phesson.”

On the other side of the world, the Mandarin Chinese called the bird “zhìji,” while their neighbors in Mongolia called it (very rough phonetic translation ahead) “*tsagirgan huzuut gurgaa*.” Neither helps us much in the English usage. Thankfully, the editors at the *Oxford English Dictionary* trace the first use of the “pheasant” spelling back to the mid-13th century. By the time Noah Webster finished his landmark *American Dictionary* in 1828, pheasant was the settled spelling.

Shakespeare, in *The Winter’s Tale* (1623), properly spelled pheasant (depending on the edition) in a story about a bribe attempt in the halls of the Bohemian king. Shakespeare also famously had Juliet remark of Romeo’s lineage that “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Juliet meant that a name ultimately does not reflect what things are; a pheasant by any other name would still be wily, fast, elusive, confounding, frustrating, and in the end a source of happiness on many a fall afternoon.

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