The Bird Names of Aubery and Rasles

PAULEENA MACDOUGALL SEEBER

Penobscot Nation

Today, the few remaining Penobscot speakers no longer remember the names of the birds and other wildlife that their grandparents knew. Fortunately however, Frank Speck and Frank Siebert were able to collect a large number of bird names some years ago from informants who are now deceased. Speck’s work contains several errors of identification and folk etymologies which have since been corrected through the efforts of Frank Siebert, who has spent more time with the Penobscots than Speck had, and who collected more names with field identifications. However, not all of the names of birds could be collected, since some have been forgotten as a result of both language loss and changes in the bird population in Maine.

The following discussion is a result of an attempt to correlate and clarify all of the available data concerning the names of birds that were given in the Abenaki-French dictionaries of Jesuits Joseph Aubery, written from 1710 to 1715, and Sebastien Rasles, recorded from 1689 to 1721. The problem of identifying the bird names given by Aubery and Rasles is complicated by the fact that most of Rasles’ entries were given without any translation, or were identified as European bird species. Aubery also used European names in most cases, rather than giving a good description of the bird’s appearance.

The Missionaries and Their Missions

Father Sebastien Rasles arrived in Québec October 13, 1689 and lived at the missions of Sillery and St. Francis de Sales, a new settlement of Abenakis nearby at the Falls of the Chaudière

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River which was at that time under the direction of Fathers Vincent and Jacques Bigot. There he began his dictionary of Abenaki-French and there he remained for two years. At that time, the resident population of the missions included mostly Eastern Abenaki but also some Sokokis and a few Loups (probably Nipmuck). Some Algonkin, Cree, and Montagnais speakers are known to have been in the area as well. From 1691 to 1693 Rasles assisted at the mission of the Illinois but was recalled and then in the autumn of 1694 founded the mission at Norridgewock on the Kennebec River where he remained except for brief periods of time until he was killed in August 1724. In the winter of 1722–1723, most of the people from Norridgewock wintered at Wawenock (Bécancour) and St. Francis (Hamilton 1722–1723:271). After Rasles was killed in 1724 a few Canibas moved to Passamaquoddy and Penobscot territory and some went to St. Francis and Bécancour. Many returned to Norridgewock in 1727.

Father Joseph Aubery arrived in Québec in 1707 at St. Francis River or Odanak. By this time the mission comprised the Androscoggin and Pigwacket groups of Abenaki as well as Sokoki, a few Algonkin and Loups (possibly Pennacook or Mahican) (Day 1981:63). Father Aubery remained at the mission until his death in 1755 but the internal dates found in his dictionary are 1710 and 1715.

Goddard (1977:159) has remarked that the Aubery manuscript has also been ascribed to Jacques François Le Sueur (1685–1760). Le Sueur worked at Sillery and Bécancour. His dictionary, which is now unlocated, is listed in Pilling as having 900 pages (Aubery’s manuscript consists of 1,129 actual pages, with several numbering errors). Moreover, the manuscript of Le Sueur’s catechism in the Archives du Séminaire de Québec provides an example of his handwriting to compare with that of the Aubery manuscript. They are unquestionably different hands. It is in the capitalized letters that one can especially see very distinctive chirographic styles. Also, the lower case s of Aubery is like our modern cursive s, but Le Sueur always writes an s that consists of one stroke and begins at the height of his capital letters. In addition, Le Sueur’s writing is slanted consistently to the right and is very neat and linear, whereas Aubery’s tends to be more vertical and irregular horizontally.

Aubery’s name appears in his manuscript in two places:
page 352: "nateb8 p. aubri Le pere aubri donne un festin." nateb8 is not known in Penobscot, and is evidently Loup. Math­evet (1975) gives Loup ninatebaskan (pages 14 and 114) and nene­nateb8ke (page 84) ‘Je fais festin’. Aubery’s name occurs again on page 614: “mañi-mañrh-asse8éhédit ayant chacun un habit different -sè8éhédit ayant des habits de diverses couleurs. Le P. aubry ne distingue pas ces deux mots veut qu’ils signifient la meme chose.” Here, Aubery attests forms with and without syncope.

These examples may have been copied down as utterances by Abenakis overheard by Aubery, or he may have had a scribe or other religious assistant working with him to copy his notes. Considering that the manuscript is mostly alphabetized, it is likely that it is a copy from other notes. It is noteworthy that his name is spelled differently in the two examples (but in the same handwriting.)

Within Aubery’s manuscript, there are occasional entries in another hand (page 281 and 253, for example). These samples include writing which is more regularly slanted and evenly written like that of Le Sueur’s, but a close examination reveals many differences in letter style, so that I am not convinced that this is Le Sueur’s hand either. Perhaps one day the Le Sueur dictionary will once more come to light so that this controversy may be put to rest.

Given the variety of languages and dialects spoken at the missions we might then expect something less than dialectal purity in the linguistic recordings of the two missionaries. The primary interest of the missionaries in studying the Indian language was to learn it well enough to begin teaching the Gospel. Thus they were preoccupied with composing prayers and other religious works in the native tongue. This is especially evident in Aubery’s dictionary which contains many made-up phrases expressing biblical ideas. Perhaps this explains the lack of translations or descriptions of the birds given by Rasles. They were simply not important to his work. Fortunately some of the European bird species correspond closely to American species. In the rare instances when descriptions were given, a species identification is often possible.

Classification

The classification of birds in Abenaki includes two life-form categories which do not have sharply defined boundaries. They
are: /ssipəss/ 'duck, fowl' and /ssipsis/ 'bird', a diminutive form. Each bird is given a name usually corresponding to a species name in English. However, some terms seem to be semi-generic as in /áwehle/, 'broad-winged hawk', and /áwehles/, 'sharp-shinned hawk' and /kohkohk-/ as in /kohkókhkahso/ and /kókókhkhes/ 'barred owl' and 'hawk owl'. Some bird names are varietal as /wəpí kilahkw/ 'snowgoose' and /wəpikílahkwsis/ 'lesser snow goose'.

The process of naming birds in Penobscot includes the use of a number of elements which are sometimes used alone and sometimes in various combinations. In several cases the final or prefinal /-ihle-/ 'bird' is added to a root. For example /matewihle/ 'loon, magic bird' and /papóinihle/ 'rough legged hawk, winter bird'.

There are some bird names which are unanalyzable primary lexemes such as /títəyəs/ 'blue jay', /mémé/ 'pileated woodpecker', and /kəlo/ 'golden eagle'.

Some bird names are metaphorically descriptive such as /pípikwəss/ 'red-tailed hawk' ('little flute'), and /skwətes/ 'redstart' ('small fire'), /wákwanəss/ 'cormorant' ('old heel'), /nenémihkəwəss/ 'spotted sandpiper' ('little bobbing hind parts') and /wɔwáhtaωahso/ 'grackle' ('he shines steadily').

Diminution, reduplication and onomatopoeia are frequently used in naming birds. In some cases the reduplication mimics the bird's call. For example, /sóhsohsəlɪ/ 'white throated sparrow'. Several other onomatopoeic segments include /sehsi-/ 'cry, whine'; /k'iwkʷ-/, /wihkw-/, /kik-/, /h'iw-/, for 'whistle'; /pípikw-/, /kkihk- for 'flute' and /kohkohk- for the owl's hoot. Other bird names which clearly imitate the bird's calls are /h'ippōləssə/ 'whippoorwill', /ciláhčəlɪ/ 'ovenbird' and /kəčəkikiləhso/ for 'chickadee'.

Data From Aubery and Rasles

The Appendix includes the bird names from Aubery and Rasles as they appear in their original form and with English translations and the words known to modern Penobscots that were collected by Frank Siebert. The table includes the page numbers of the original manuscripts. In Aubery's manuscript, several errors of pagination may cause confusion to anyone trying to find the terms referred to. The entries from Rasles in the published work edited by Pickering contain a number of
copying errors which have been corrected here.

Rasles listed 45 bird names (8añ8atta8ass8 he listed twice). Modern Penobscots could identify 32 of these or roughly 70 percent of the list. I located 37 bird name entries in Aubery, of which 27 or roughly 72 percent could be identified by Penobscots in modern times. This is significant, for the differences in the dialects were minor. It may well be that the remaining examples were unknown to Penobscots not because of dialect differences, but because of language loss and habitat changes of the species involved.

The following is a discussion of some examples of interest which illustrate both dialect differences and transcription errors.

1. Rasles manuscript (page 22): ampteg8ak ‘outardes’; (page 369) amptg8ak sg. amptg8é; Pickering (page 383): 8añpteg8ak and (page 496) amptg8ak; Aubery (page 328): ‘houtarde’ ampteg8é; Penobscot: /wáptakˈwe/ ‘Canada Goose’.

Note the differences in spelling between Rasles’ original manuscript and the Pickering edition. Rasles and Aubery agree in the loss of the initial w. This probably reflects a difference in dialect between the Androscoggin, Caniba and Penobscot dialects. However, the word for ‘white’ given by Rasles retains the w: Pickering (page 394), Rasles manuscript (page 57) ‘[blanc] Cela est blanc’, 8añbighen 8ahbighen 8o. Aubery gives 8añbi 8ghen, 8 ‘il est blanc’ (page 806).


This is undoubtedly a misrecording. Rasles gives aspiration to a preceding syllable, and Aubery gives a liquid for a glide.

3. Aubery (page 385): ‘merle’ k8iq8skéss8; (page 317): ‘grive’ k8ik8skéss8 ... k8g8s8k8i8an; Penobscot: /wihkˈ8skehso/ ‘robin’ (Rasles gives no similar term).

This example shows initial dissimilatory suppression, an Eastern Abenaki dialectal phenomenon (Siebert 1981). It is commonly found throughout both Rasles’ and Aubery’s dictionaries.

4. Rasles manuscript (page 23): meskigaɾdaghitˈrē ...; Penobscot: /pskekutákihle/ ‘spruce partridge; Canada grouse’.

This word is so close to the Penobscot form except for the initial consonant that it seems likely it is a mis-hearing of the labial stop m for p. The Penobscot term means ‘black spruce
bird’. The black spruce is so named because of the way its branches sweep downward.

(5) Rasles manuscript (page 23): ? eskesékésess8 (Pickering gives ts for initial consonant); Penobscot: /koskèsék'wesoh/ ‘Canada Jay, Gray Jay’.

In the original manuscript the initial consonant is unclear and Pickering’s ts was just a poor guess. More than likely Rasles wrote a k.

(6) Rasles manuscript (page 23): nénéttasso...; Penobscot: /anéhtahso/ ‘hummingbird’. This species does not sing.

The name for the hummingbird comes from roots /nanaht-/ in Western Abenaki and /neneht-/ in Eastern Abenaki meaning ‘dumb, unable to speak’. In Penobscot this shows the initial consonantal dissimilatory suppression throughout, reflected in the bird name and also in the AI verb /anéhtawe/ ‘he is dumb’.

(7) Aubery (page 580): sig8eni-rré ‘(oiseau) du printemps’.

None of Siebert’s informants knew this term although Speck (1921:358) stated that this was an alternate name for ‘hawk’. Laurent gave the Western Abenaki seguaniilha ‘smiter hawk’. In Penobscot there is no known corresponding bird name, only the AI ~ II /sik’wáníhle/ ‘he ~ it comes in the spring.’

(8) Aubery (page 30): alouëte (lark, sandpiper) sessess8, sesesksésess8, tani-sésess8 ‘je ne scay pas le francois des noms oiseaux que les sauvages nomment,’ (page 435): pluvier (plover) sésséss8; (page 485): sarcelle (teal) sésséss8, ketsi-sésséss8; Rasles manuscript (page 23): sésséss8 ...; Laurent (page 37): sasaso ‘a plover’, sasasois ‘a small species of plover’.

This term is not known to Penobscots but has several cognates in other languages. It was given by Siebert (1967:16) as the Greater Yellowlegs. Since both Aubery and Rasles give this term showing the e instead of the Western Abenaki a it is most likely an Eastern Abenaki name for this species.

(9) Aubery (page 102): caillé (quail) taganirré, tag8aten, tagasirré.

The root /tak-/ ‘strike’ may be found in this entry. I have found no other cognates, but suspect this might be the ptarmigan, a quail-like bird sometimes found in Eastern Abenaki territory. No Penobscot knew this word or was able to give a name for the ptarmigan.

(10) Aubery (page 317): grue (crane) tarégan; 8tsitsak, 8tsitsak8ak; Rasles manuscript (page 23): grue tarégaì, pl. ňk.
This example is striking because it clearly has a word from a language other than Abenaki together with the Abenaki term. Both entries appear to be in the same handwriting in Aubery. It is the Sandhill Crane as shown by cognates in other Eastern Algonquian languages. 

8tsitsak, 8tsitsak8ak is Algonkin or Cree. (See adjidjak in Baraga (1853:8) and ooche‘chak in Watkins (1865:41, 324).)

(11) Aubery (page 716): ta8-akk8is (perhaps |taw-| ‘perforate’ |-ahkw-| ‘long’) Lirondelle a col noir, martinet (swallow, swift, martin with a black neck.)

This seems to describe the bank swallow, a long, cigar-shaped bird that nests in holes in dirt banks and has a dark brown neck. However, neither this term nor any other word for the bank swallow was collected from modern Penobscot speakers.


In this example Aubery has apparently left out the initial t in his first entry. Both Aubery and Rasles spell this word with the k instead of k’w at the end of the first syllable, unlike the Penobscot version. Their version of the word matches that given by Laurent for Western Abenaki.

(13) Rasles (page 23): 8éranié le hiboux (owl).

The only unnamed owl in Penobscot is the screech owl which occurs in Maine as far east as the Kennebec. Rand recorded wolawaach as the Micmac term for ‘screech owl’. Perhaps this is a cognate in Eastern Abenaki. It is extremely rare in the Penobscot valley.

(14) Rasles (page 23): kakesok8éss8 ...; kakesiket8i’ré ...

Speck collected the term ka’kase’k’watsit for ‘bluebird’ while at Indian Island (1921:372 and footnote 2) Siebert was unable to get a word for this bird, which is somewhat rare in the Penobscot valley today. No additional data have as yet been found to identify these forms.

(15) Rasles (page 23): tatañg8 ‘qui est to[ut] blanc, c’est pretre des moves [mauvés].’

This word is not known to Penobscots. However, the cognate in Micmac (Rand 1888) Tadagoo ‘gannet’ and Rasles’
description makes it almost certain that this is an Eastern Abenaki term for gannet. This bird does occur on the Maine coast.


Rasles’ word was cited by Pentland (1983:382) as the Caniba form for ‘bluejay’. However, Rasles entered it without translation. Aubery gave the term titiaňs which matches the Penobscot /titǝyas/. It seems unlikely that tsitses8 is a Caniba form for the bluejay given the data from Aubery. It is more likely that this is the name of some other species.

(17) Rasles (page 23): am8kamenes8 ‘oiseau qui regarde le soleil’. This is the ‘bittern’, known to Penobscots as /nohkhamanasso/. I suspect that Rasles’ m should have been an n. The prothetic a is the result of a common linguistic process.

Of the ten bird names listed by Aubery that were unknown to Penobscots one term seems to be Algonkin and one closely resembles Western Abenaki. The rest are probably Eastern Abenaki names for birds that were unknown to Penobscots due to language loss or species habitation changes. Rasles gives just one term which may be Western Abenaki in which he agrees with Aubery. Some of his terms seem to be from dialects further west than the Caniba of Norridgewock, and probably reflect his early work at Sillery. Except for omissions, there is little difference in the entries given by Aubery and Rasles. Both recorded words the other didn’t have, but most of the bird names in either dictionary were known to Penobscots.
APPENDIX:
Aubery and Rasles Bird Names
Known to Penobscots

Aubery
page 840: ñëppâres8 ‘oiseau qui crie popouri’; /hWîppólâsson/ ‘whippoorwill’
page 427: perdrix matsirëss8; Rasles (page 23): matsirëss8, perdrix; /mâçh-lehso/ ‘partridge, ruffed grouse’
page 439: poule éhém8 poulet éhém8is /èhemo/ ‘heath hen, (chicken)’
page 104: canard k8ik8îmes8; Rasles (page 23): k8ik8îmes8, canard; /kWîkWî-mass8/ ‘black duck’; brancher arenteg8irréss8; Rasles (page 23): arenteg8irréss8, cane, espèce de canard; /âlantskWîhlehso/ ‘wood duck’; canard d’automne tag8an8g8îirréss8; /takWâ kawflehso/ ‘pintail duck’ (species identification tentative); s8bëg8irréss8; /sopékWîhlehso/ ‘scoter’ (all species)
page 25: aigle sa8aûg8an; Rasles (page 22): sa8aûg8an, aigle; /nsâwakan/ ‘bald eagle’
page 324: hibou k8k8kass8; Rasles (page 22): k8k8ka’ss8, le coucou (Pickering: k8kass8; /kohkohkhahso/ ‘barred owl’
heron kask8; Rasles (page 23): kask8 ...; /kàsko/ ‘Great blue heron’
page 283: faucon, oiseau de proie a8ëré ou pipig8s; Rasles (page 23): aë’éré, aë’erak oiseau de proie (Pickering: aë’éré’ak os ?)), pipig8s, oiseau de proie; /âwehle/ ‘broad winged hawk’, /pîpikW’oss/ ‘red-tailed hawk’
page 161: corbeau mkâs8; Rasles (page 23) mkâs8, corbeau; /mkâss8/ ‘crow’
page 160: coq éhém8 naëbbéré; /nàpehle/ ‘cock’; coq d’inde néhém8; Rasles (page 23) nahame, pls. mak, coq d’Inde; /néhume/ ‘turkey’
page 408: oie sa8nbig8hirak8k8é; Rasles (page 23) sa8nbig8hirak8ak ...; /wapfiklahkw/ ‘snowgoose; (domestic goose)’
page 67: azur titiâns; /titayus/ ‘blue jay’
page 55: aënbâssëss8 picque bois oiseau; /apâhsehso/ ‘downy or hairy woodpecker’ (both species)
page 214: kakaskaredzëss8 rossignol; /kakaskálâcëhs8/ ‘song sparrow’
page 541: prés, présak tourtes, a8en8ts8i-préssak; Rasles(page 22): prés, présak, des tourtes; /pâles/ ‘passenger pigeon (rock dove, pigeon)’, (awenôcôwi- ‘white man’s’)
page 580: pepôni-rré oiseau d’hyver; /papônhle/ ‘rough legged hawk’
Rasles pages 22–23 (Pickering 383–384)

8įg8ėrrė cigne; /wɨkʷwehle/ ‘whistling swan’

metėh8i’rė huart; /mətewihle/ ‘loon’

ahaaŋ8ess8 ...; /aháwehso/ ‘oldsquaw duck’

8ag8anes ...; /wákʷanəss/ ‘double-crested cormorant’

8aŋ8atta8ass8 ...; /wɔwáhtawahso/ ‘grackle’

kɔaissé ...; /kəwehso/ ‘mallard duck’

mek8imines, -sak [Pickering: mek8imins, -sak] oiseau tout rouge et les ailes noirs; /mkʷfiminəss/ ‘scarlet tanager’

séšibänregs8anė ...; /sehsipulakʷane/ ‘ruddy duck’

pitamps8k8ė ...; /pitahpskwə/ ‘harlequin duck’

kaa’k8 [Pickering: kaak8] v. kaiak8 ...; /kahkw/ ‘herring gull’

8ssidak8s ...; /wəsítahkwəss/ ‘American coot’

meretséses ...; /moťɔčessəss/ ‘whistler, goldeneye duck’

esk8adadėss8 ...; /eskʷatátehso/ ‘Baltimore Oriole’

aįbitsirak8ak ...; /apícilahkw/ ‘blue goose’

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