

Name that Butterfly

Recently, someone asked me why the English names of butterflies were so much less useful than the English names of birds, meaning that the percentage of bird names that help one to distinguish a species from other birds or at least remember what they look like, is noticeably higher than the percentage of butterfly names that serve this same function.

Actually, in a quick count, I tallied 237 of the 722 butterflies (33%) on the NABA Checklist that had descriptive names and 434 of the 935 birds (46%) on the ABA Checklist that had descriptive names (considering only the species, not the group, name — Tailed Copper is descriptive but Cassius Blue is not). Which names are “descriptive” is open to interpretation.

A more straightforward question is “what percentage of names are based directly on the scientific name of the organism?” Here there was a clear cut difference between the two name-sets. Thirty-two percent of the butterfly “English” names are the same as the species’ scientific name (or a very slight variation thereof) while only nine percent of the birds are so named.

These questions were especially interesting to me because I have recently needed English names for about 1300 species of Mexican butterflies for an upcoming field guide to Mexican butterflies.

Before we think about why there might be different naming patterns for butterfly and bird species, let’s look at the bigger picture. Many groups of birds, at least in temperate regions, have English names that arose from public usage. Like the words cat or oak, these names, such as jay, swallow, wren and sparrow do not refer to objects, ideas or words outside of the named organism. Words for these birds existed far back in time and the current English names trace back to at least the Middle Ages.

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In contrast, until the early 1700s, apparently there were no widely used English names for individual butterfly species. James Petiver gave English names to many of the English butterflies in the early 1700s, but few of his names are currently in use. Later naturalists coined the names now in use.

When a culture does not have a name for something, it doesn’t really exist, and certainly isn’t important. Knowledge of local plants is critical for survival, many plants are used for food and medicine, while some plants are toxic. Thus, early on, there were English names for a large variety of plants and, as we have seen, English speakers paid attention to birds as well, again because many of them were eaten, but probably also because of their conspicuousness. But butterflies? Judging from the historical lack of widely used names for most different kinds of butterflies, they didn’t really exist!

When English, and then American, naturalists coined English names for butterflies, they didn’t coin *sui generis* group names, such as wren or swallow, although they easily could have done so (think speep for skipper). Rather they created names that incorporate the meaning of an already existing word into the butterfly group name, e.g., swallowtail (1741; having a tail similar to a swallow), orangetip (1747; having an orange wingtip) or skipper (1766; referring to the flight pattern).

Although some bird group names are of this form, e.g., bluebird and hummingbird, look down a list of butterflies and you will see that essentially all the group names fit this pattern. Even the word “fritillary” which dates to 1699, probably derives from a much older plant name. (To be continued)

