

Taxonomists Just Wanna Have Fun:

by Harry Zirlin

All in the (Sub)Family

Those of you with long memories may recall that back in the winter of 2001 this column featured an article entitled “Generically Speaking” which discussed the derivation of the genus names for many of the swallowtails, whites and sulphurs that appear at the beginning of NABA’s Checklist & English Names of North American Butterflies (Second Edition, 2001). I promised then to deal with other genus names in the future and somehow the future has finally caught up with me. But rather than picking up where I left off, I am going to skip ahead to the back of NABA’s Checklist and discuss some of the skippers there.

Of all the butterfly groups, for some reason skippers have long been my favorite. Perhaps it is because they are often overlooked by others that I am drawn to them. All skippers are in the family Hesperidae, and that name is derived from the genus *Hesperia*. The genus name, in turn, is a classical name meaning “land of the evening” and was applied to Italy by Aeneas, the Trojan prince who founded Rome in Virgil’s Aeneid. Aeneas, as a Trojan, had to travel west towards the evening or setting sun to reach Italy.

The genus *Hesperia* was first created in 1793 by Johan Fabricius (1745-1808) when *Hesperia comma* (our own Common Branded Skipper) was moved by Fabricius from the genus *Papilio* (the genus into which Linnaeus (1707-1778) placed all butterflies and skippers) to this newly created genus. The type locality of *Hesperia comma*, (meaning the

place from which the specimen originally described by Linnaeus was from) is Sweden. Why, then, would Fabricius have named the genus for a classical word meaning Italy? The answer, I believe, lies in the evening sky. In Greek mythology, the three Hesperides, sisters named Hesperie, (“evening”), Aegle (“dazzling light”) and Erytheis (“Crimson”) lived in the far west in the apple orchard of Hera. I believe Fabricius used the name *Hesperia* as a genus for those dazzling, golden-hued skippers that were clad in the colors of an evening sunset – reddish-orange and yellow.

Certainly the skippers in the genus now comprising *Hesperia*, including the Common Branded Skipper, fit that description.

The first North American genus of the Hesperidae on our checklist is *Pyrrhopyge*, in the subfamily Pyrrhopyginae, which contains the single North American representative of a tropical group known as “firetips.” The genus was created by the German lepidopterist Jacob Hübner (1761-1826) in 1819. Our species, Dull Firetip, *Pyrrhopyge araxes* is an anomaly because, unlike most other species in this genus, the tip of its abdomen does not contain the fiery crimson or orange color from which both the English and scientific names are derived. The English name, however, is somewhat of a euphemism in my view. “*Pyrrh*” does indeed mean “fire” or “flame-colored” as an adjective (the words “pyre” and “fire” are both derived from the same Greek word) but “pyge” means “rump” or “buttocks.” So, *Pyrrhopyge*, literally translated, means “flame-colored rump” to put it nicely, though not so nicely as “Firetip.” The specific name “*araxes*” is the name of an important river in present day Turkey.

Note that both “pyrrh” and “pyge” are words that can stand alone. When words of



Above: Sunset colors? Perhaps. But, to be sure, this Common Branded Skipper is set in the sun.

July 23, 2006. Teton Co., WY.



Above: A Desert Checkered-Skipper plays dice with the universe.

Oct. 20, 2003. La Gloria, Starr Co., TX.

this nature are joined to form a scientific name, a vowel is added to the first word (in this case an “o”) in order that the compound word will flow or sound better (“euphony”). Thus, a vowel in the middle of a long scientific word is often a clue that the name is a compound word. Indeed, Lepidoptera is just such a name. “Lepid” means “scale” and “ptera” means wing. The “o” that joins these two words is there for a euphonious effect.

After the subfamily Pyrrhopyginae, the next group we come to on the checklist is the subfamily of spread-wing skippers. By

the way, the hyphen in “spread-wing” serves to join the two words the way the vowel