

# Wanna Have Fun Taxonomists

## One for the Road(side)

by Harry Zirlin

### Many butterflies keep lists

of the species they have encountered, such as a life list, a year list, a state list, a county list, a backyard list, and so on. I keep only two lists — a life list and a list of the species whose names I have covered in this column. I need the latter to prevent me from repeating myself (or at least to minimize repeating myself) and as an aid to decide what to write about next. Towards the back of the NABA Checklist & English Names of North American Butterflies I use for this purpose, there is a block of 22 species of which I have written about only one. They are the somewhat enigmatic group of mostly small skippers with the English group name “Roadside-Skippers” in the genus *Amblyscirtes*. The genus name *Amblyscirtes* itself is something of an enigma and here let me digress.

I recently purchased, through a large book chain, a used copy of Howard Ensign Evans’ classic *Wasp Farm* (Natural History Press, Garden City, 1963). I paid less than \$4 for this treasure, but someone made a profit, as it was clearly stamped “DISCARD” from the Paw Paw Public Library in Paw Paw, Michigan. (I’d like to see what books the Paw Paw Public Library kept in preference to *Wasp Farm*.) At the end of each chapter, Evans had

a section called “Cast of Characters” in which he listed the scientific names of the wasps he had discussed in the chapter. Then he set out the derivation of each name and, what struck me, was how clearly each wasp had been named. In the entire book, with a cast of characters approaching 100 species of wasps, never did Evans have any difficulty discerning the meaning of either part of any wasps’ binomial appellation. Would that butterflies were named so clearly!

So, back to the topic. *Amblyscirtes*, named by Samuel Scudder in 1872, is not that easy to decipher. “*Ambly*” can mean several things including “slow,” “lazy,” “blunt,” “dull,” or “stupid.” Amblyopia, for example, is the name for a medical condition commonly referred to as “Lazy Eye.” The tiger beetle genus *Amblycheila* is named for the blunt “lip” = “cheila” shared by members of the genus. “*Scirtes*” means “to leap” and there is a family of leaping beetles known as the Scirtidae. So, putting *Ambly* and *scirtes* together I get something like “Slow leaper.” I suppose if by “slow leaper” Scudder meant something like “slow flyer” the name could make sense, as members of this group are somewhat slower fliers than many other skippers. Still, I am