

# Each Individual is Unique

Every Tuesday, the New York Times has a section entitled “Science Times.” The June 15, 2010 issue had an article about behavior in Barbary macaques and another article about the formation of scales in butterflies. Both contained interesting content, but here I’m going to focus not on the content but on the style in which each was presented.

Each article was accompanied by a photograph. The article about macaque behavior featured a photograph of a male macaque carrying an infant macaque while alongside the butterfly scale article was a photograph of a dead emerald-patched cattleheart. These two photographs, and especially their captions, reveal quite a bit about the prevailing view of butterflies compared to almost all other wildlife.

Let’s start with the photographs themselves. As to be expected, the photo of the macaques is of live animals. Not many readers would enjoy seeing a photo of a dead male macaque with a dead infant macaque placed on its back. In contrast, the photo of an emerald-patched cattleheart is of a dead, dried and spread individual. Neither caption mentions the state of animation of the subject matter.

In the case of the macaques, almost everyone would recognize and distinguish a photo of a dead monkey from one of a live monkey, and so stating that the photo was of a live macaque would have been superfluous. Not so for the butterfly photo. The great majority of people will not understand that the butterfly in the photo is dead. For example, I recently saw a brochure for the Surgery Dept. at New York University Medical Center. The brilliant cover illustration was of a butterfly on a flower. The butterfly was from South America and the flower was North American — but, OK. More seriously, the butterfly in the photo was dead. I pointed out to the head of surgery that having a dead butterfly as their logo might not convey the most confidence in the outcome of their work. He was grateful for this information!

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The caption for the macaque photo begins “A Barbary macaque...” The caption for the butterfly scale photo begins “The emerald-patched cattleheart butterfly.” What has led to the small and subtle, but ultimately profound differences between these captions? The answer is the realization that animal species, such as Barbary macaques, are composed of individuals. This realization leads people to understand that each Barbary macaque has value, that Barbary macaques are not fungible commodities.

In contrast, the popular conception of butterflies has been strongly influenced by people who view butterflies as objects — to be collected and traded — rather than as individual living animals.

There are two ways that “The emerald-patched cattleheart butterfly” works to objectify butterflies. First, the “the” in front of “emerald” groups all of the thousands of individual emerald-patched cattlehearts into a “species.” But, a species is a theoretical human construct (whose limits are subjective) whereas each individual butterfly is a living animal whose unique genes might be of great importance to its descendents. When people refer to birds or mammals, they usually say something like “there are squirrels in Central Park” not “The squirrel inhabits Central Park.” The latter encourages a thought process that subsumes the individual animal to be an insignificant part of the “species.”

Second, the word “butterfly,” in “emerald-patched cattleheart butterfly,” rather than being part of the name of the animal, is a classification and serves to create more emotional distance between the reader and the butterfly. Some say that without the word “butterfly” people would be confused by “Monarch” or “Spicebush Swallowtail.” But, the meaning of words is almost always apparent from context.

(Continued on inside back cover)

## Readers Write

### Thanks

Thank you for the Spring 2010 issue. I was especially grateful for the *Go Get Set On Your Question Marks* article. I had been to Glacier National Park last August and had taken a photo of a comma. I referred to several books I have to identify the butterfly further, but became so confused and flustered that I just gave up. Your article was just what I needed to identify my butterfly as a Green Comma. Thanks for all that NABA does for butterflies and the knowledge provided. I think, especially now, the butterflies need all the help they can get.

Sue Allie, The Villages, Florida

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## NABA News and Notes

(continued from inside front cover)

### NABA Art Contest

Artists interested in entering the ninth NABA Art Contest should submit high quality digital images (submitted on a CD or DVD — attempted submission via email will result in disqualification)(maximum of 3 images) of original two-dimensional color “paintings,” in any medium. The digital file name should include the artist’s name. If realistic, the painting should depict species found in Mexico, the United States or Canada. In your cover letter, please indicate the dimensions of the original work, give a description of the medium of the work, and provide a release granting to NABA the one-time right to copy and publish the image in *American Butterflies* and at its website. Please include a telephone number where you can be reached. Submissions need to be **received** not later than May 1, 2011. Winning artist will receive a prize of \$150, 2nd place winner will receive \$50 and winners will have their works published in color in the Fall 2011 issue of *American Butterflies*. All decisions of the judges are final.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lists various species and subspecies of animals as “endangered.” When the USFWS refers to these animals it uses English in addition to scientific names. Here are some listed species: Akekee, Tubercled Blossom, Mexican Blindcat, Moapa Dace, Watercress Darter, Canada Lynx, Desert Monitor, Rough Pigtoe, Guam Rail, Long-tailed Ground Roller, Hawaiian Stilt.

Very few people would know whether each of these species is a bivalve, a fish a cat or a bird. In addition, many of the group names, such as blossom (this is a type of mussel), darter (a fish), monitor (a reptile), rail (a bird), roller (a bird) and stilt (a bird), are words commonly used in the English language to convey a meaning other than the one used in this list. But that’s OK — these are the animals’ names. One doesn’t see articles about Least Tern Birds on the beaches.

Yet, the USFWS, insists on adding the word “butterfly” after the actual name of each butterfly. There’s Mitchell’s Satyr Butterfly and Schaus’ Swallowtail Butterfly. Hmm. Have you ever seen a butterfly field guide that call these animals Mitchell’s Satyr Butterfly or Schaus’ Swallowtail Butterfly? All the other butterflies on the list are treated the same way.

So, whenever you see a photo of a dead butterfly in an advertisement or illustrating an article about live butterflies; or when you see a media story about butterflies that refers to “the Mitchell’s Satyr Butterfly” or “the Karner Blue Butterfly” please contact the organization involved and gently explain to them that living butterflies are preferable to dead butterflies and that the linguistic constructs they are using are stilted and different from the ones that are used for birds and mammals. In my experience, when this is explained to reporters and editors they understand the point and modify their usage.

