

Let Us Now Laud Linnaeus

*His intellect was keen and penetrating
but his greatest characteristic was his ability to
reason methodically:
Whatever he said or did was methodical and
systematical.*

—Johan Christian Fabricius,
student of Linnaeus, writing in 1805

With the tercentenary observance of the birth of Linnaeus,¹ it seemed fitting to dedicate a few column inches to him, the system of scientific nomenclature he invented (or at least popularized), and a bit about the Latin and Greek words it employs.

Perhaps my interest in Linnaeus was also whetted after I learned of a recent tempest in a taxonomic teapot on Barbados. Some residents of that Lesser Antilles island rose up in high dudgeon after Penn State biologist S Blair Hedges “discovered” and named the world’s smallest known snake, the 4-inch-long *Leptotyphlops carlae*, after his wife, Carla.^{2,3}

Some background: By tradition and precedent since the time of Linnaeus, “discoverers” of a new species win the right to name their find. I place the word *discoverers* in quotes because locals have sometimes known—maybe even dined on—a newly named plant or animal for generations before it gets scientifically described. The defense mounted by taxonomic science to these sorts of charges over the generations since Linnaeus has been to assert that a species is not considered “discovered” until it is precisely described and its description published in a scientific journal. (To me, this position has always rung somewhat hollow. I liken it to Columbus’s discovering America; what he discovered after making landfall was that people were already here.)

There is speculation that Linnaeus might have conceived his “last name, first name” binomial-nomenclature system because of the generalized adoption of formal surnames that was then occurring across Sweden.⁴ Sons usually derived their “surnames” from the given names of their fathers before that. But about the time of Linnaeus, that changed. His given name

was Carl (*Carolus* in Latin), which meant that his sons would all bear the name Carlsson. Instead, Linnaeus’s father, Nils, decided to name himself after a specimen linden tree (a *linn* in Old Swedish) that he admired on his family’s land, making him Nils Linné. Thus, the newborn Carl, Nil’s son (Nilsson), became Carl Linné, which was Latinized in his scholarly publications to Carolus Linnaeus. His name is now universally recognized in taxonomies simply as Linnaeus and is represented by “L.” (note the period) after a genus or species to indicate that it was he who first described the type species under discussion.

Although Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* was authoritative during the first 100 years or so after its promulgation, the codes for zoologic and botanic nomenclature are today maintained and regulated by two principal scientific organizations—the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) and the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (ICBN), respectively. Names of bacteria and viruses are standardized and coded by their own regulatory groups.

The Council of Science Editors’ *Scientific Style and Format*, 7th edition, discusses “Taxonomy and Nomenclature” in Chapter 22 (pp 342–372). Interested readers will find therein good coverage of the use of Latin and the rules of its grammar as applied to Linnaean taxonomy (see especially pp 345 and 348). Chapter 8 (“Names and Terms”) of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th edition, contains a similarly good treatment of Latin names of plants and animals in Sections 8.127–8.138 (pp 356–359).

Some Latin genus and species names seem almost inspired. Take, for instance, *Amaryllis belladonna*, the “pretty lady” lily (commonly called the naked lady), the unadorned, graceful stalks and perfumed blooms of which grace our northern California curbsides and countrysides in late summer. Another lovely name is that of the California golden trout, *Salmo aquabonita aquabonita* (the duplicated epithet indicates that this species is indeed the original “type species” to be described and

The Word Hawk

continued

precedes the discovery of the subspecies *S. a. whitei* and *S. a. roosevelti*). The name of the California golden trout may be translated loosely as “trout of the beautiful waters” because it does indeed thrive only in the highest, coldest, purest Sierran tarns and watercourses.

Other favorites of mine in the “zoo-” realm include *Mephitis mephitis* and *Mimus polyglottos*. The first, the Linnaean name for the American skunk, could be loosely translated as *Stinks! Stinks!*; the second name, that of the northern mockingbird, might be rendered as *imitates many tongues* because male mockingbirds have been known to sing as many as 200 songs and can even mimic car alarms. (A friend of mine liked to translate the feathered chatterbox’s name as *Singus anythingus*, a name that ranks right up there with Wile E. Coyote of Roadrunner cartoon fame.) But the champ in the fun-colorful-whimsical category, in my book, is *Bitis* (sounds like Bite-us to me) *gabonica*, the exceedingly venomous gaboon viper.

Most other Linnaean names are straightforwardly descriptive, albeit less inventive: *Leptotyphlops*, the 86-member genus of thread snakes that introduced this article, is derived from the three Greek words *leptos* (slender or thin), *typhlos* (blind), and *ops* (eye), referring to the reptile’s slenderness and lack of functional sight organs. *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the one-horned Indian rhinoceros, originates from the Greek $\rho\iota\upsilon\varsigma$ (*rhinos*), nose, and $\kappa\rho\alpha\varsigma$ (*keras*), horn,

yielding “horned nose”, an unarguably logical if relatively pedestrian descriptor. (Amusingly, a group or herd of rhinos may correctly be called a crash.) And Linnaean names often invoke locales—as with *Nautilus belauensis*, the marine cephalopod found in the waters around Palau.

Some recent naming practices are pushing the envelope. Auctioning the name of a newly discovered species has arisen as a way to raise money for nonprofit causes⁵ or to generate publicity for profit-making interests.⁶ (That was another reason I placed the word *discoverers* in quotes in my third paragraph.)

Chuckle of the Month: According to an article in the 22 August 2008 *Arizona Republic*,⁷ Jeff Deck, 28, of Somerville, MA, and Benjamin Herson, 28, of Virginia Beach, VA, pleaded guilty in an Arizona court after they corrected a typo in a hand-painted sign in Grand Canyon National Park. Members of a group called the Typo Eradication Advancement League (TEAL), they were sentenced to a year’s probation, banned from national parks for a year, and ordered to pay damages. According to a posting on TEAL’s Web site, its members pledged to “stamp out as many typos as we can find, in public signage and other venues, where innocent eyes may be befouled by vile stains on the delicate fabric of our language.” At last—two people who are more compulsive about such things than I.

References

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