

## What's In A Name?

I recently had the opportunity to teach a Nature Journaling workshop to a group of 11 to 13 years old young people. As we were discussing the entries in my own 2023 nature journal, the question of names came up. They specifically wanted to know why some of the scientific names were so strange.

The conversation started when one student noticed that our state bird, the Western meadowlark sports the scientific name, *Stunella neglecta*. They wanted to know why. I could not answer the question, and we were in a remote part of Wyoming at the Medicine Lodge Archeological Site near Hyattville. There was no cell phone coverage, hence no way to look up the answer.

I fielded guesses. All seemed to agree when one young lady suggested that nobody paid any attention to the pretty-sounding birds, so they were neglected. When I got home and did some research, I found out her answer was not too far off the truth.

American ornithologist John James Audubon formally described the Western meadowlark in 1844. The name, *Sturnella neglecta* does come from the Latin word, *neglectus*, which of course means ignored, overlooked, neglected, or disregarded. During the Lewis and Clark Expedition of the American West from 1803-1806, the explorers mentioned yellow larks, but never formally described them. Because of this, Audubon gave them the name, *Sturnella neglecta*. Nor are they true larks but are in the New World Blackbird family.

We then talked about binomial nomenclature and our current classification system. I explained how it was easy to group organisms based on their traits, which usually indicated an evolutionary relationship. The names were Latin or sometimes Greek, with the Genus being a noun, and the species usually being an adjective. We talked about how, by using scientific names, scientists from around the world could know they were talking about the same organism because common names can all be different.

*Felis concolor* (Felis = cat, concolor = of one color) is a good example of this. In Wyoming, we generally use the common name Mountain lions, but they can also be called pumas, or cougars, depending on where a person is, and who they are talking to. I also explained that scientific names can and do change for various reasons.

With only 90 minutes to teach my workshop, not a lot of time was devoted to scientific names. However, I did present a few key points.

An organism might have the name of a country or location in its name, implying that it was first documented in that place. These included the American Coot, *Fulica americana*, the Mountain Ash (tree) *Sorbus americana*, and our beloved Pronghorn, *Antilocapra americana*, which is not an antelope. Other countries are also represented in the names listed in my journal. The House finch, *Haemorhous mexicanus*, Canada goose, *Branta canadensis*, the North American Beaver, *Castor Canadensis*, all had familiar, recognizable names of countries.

I am not sure whether they discovered the fact that I had actually seen a live American Alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*, or not. But for some reason, each child suddenly had to spell Mississippi as fast as they possibly could. There are many other state names in my journal, including the Eastern Cottontail (rabbit), *Sylvilagus floridanus*, the Ring-billed Gull, *Loris delawarensis*, the California Tortoiseshell (butterfly,) *Nymphalis californica*, and the Western Blue Flag (plant), *Iris missouriensis*. Of course, organisms are also named after the person that discovered them. Lewis flax (plant), *Linum lewisii* is a good example of that.

After I returned home, I researched some other names that I did not have answers for. These included the Northern Harrier, *Circus syaneus*. When we hear the word “circus” we tend to think of an extravaganza featuring aerial acrobats, tumbling clowns, lions, tigers, and elephants all performing various tricks and stunts to amuse us. I discovered the genus name *Circus* is from the Ancient Greek *kirkos*, which refers to a bird of prey named for its circling flight. That made sense, and most circus acts take place in rings, or circles.

But the best name in my journal belongs to the Savannah sparrow, *Passerculus sandwichensis*. Was the scientist eating a sandwich at the time they discovered and described this little bird? No, that was not the case. The species name is Latin, and represents a place, Sandwich, Unalaska Island, at the western tip of the Aleutians.



A lovely mount at Medicine Lodge Archeological Site of *Felis concolor* (Felis = cat, concolor = of one color).





Western Blue Flag, *Iris missouriensis*. This is the only iris native to Wyoming. Photographed June 15, 2021, Albany County, Wyoming, USA.





Blue Flax or Lewis Flax, *linum lewisii*. Photographed May 31, 2023, Albany County, Wyoming, USA.

Now, with modern technology, another twist has been added to the process of naming organisms. According to the University of California, Santa Barbara, some newly discovered organisms have been named as a result of eBay auctions. The highest bidder gets to name the organism. And sometimes, scientists just like to have fun. The wonderful cartoonist, Gary Larson of *The Far Side* fame, had a sucking louse named after him. In 1990, biologist Dale H. Clayton discovered *Strigiphilus garyloarsoni*, a species of chewing louse that are found only on owls. A very fitting tribute, in my opinion!

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