

Butterflies and Inequality

Inequality is in the news these days. People debate whether it is reasonable for a small number of people to control most of the resources of the planet.

Here, I am not going to discuss that issue. Instead, I'd like to explore the question of whether all butterflies are created equal. I bring this up because a recent blog post by a birder was brought to my attention. In this blog, the birder claimed that an extremely popular bird database website — ebird — wasn't much used by "elite" birders. Later in the post the blogger talked about the "higher echelons" of birding.

This all begs the question of what makes "elite" or "higher echelon" birders better (in their own minds) than other birders. Are the "elites" those who have larger lists (B-list envy?), those who are perhaps more skilled at bird identification, those who are exceptionally good at finding birds, those who know much about bird life history, those who know about bird behavior, those who have done significant work to conserve birds?

In the movie "My Big Year" the character played by Owen Wilson described himself as the world's best birder, because he has seen more bird species in a year than any one else. This is, of course, absurd, since what the person with the largest year list is actually better at is either having less going on in their life (at least for that year) than do other people and/or having more money than other people.

This is not to say that there is something horrible about competitive listing (although I will say that it doesn't do anything for the organisms being listed), but rather that it is unreasonable of those with bigger lists to think they are better birders or better butterflyers because of the size of their list.

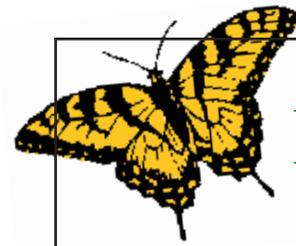
With that said, I'm going to slip in that the current total of NABA Checklist butterfly species I've seen in the United States is 611

and that I have photos, taken in the U.S. of 605 of them (I haven't yet made it to Alaska).

These strange musings remind me that quite a few first-time participants at NABA Biennial Members Meetings have spontaneously remarked that there was a wonderful difference between the NABA meeting they were attending and major meetings of birders that they had attended. They said that at the NABA meeting there was a general air of camaraderie and of everyone sharing their passion and knowledge while at birding meetings there were clearly cliques of birding snobs who looked down their noses at birders who were "beneath" them.

So, although most birders are not elitists, there does appear to an air of superiority among certain groups of birders that turns others away. This is what butterflyers should strive to avoid — turning others away. We should be warm and welcoming — and we have been!

Along these lines, I have consistently suggested that butterflyers use language that the average person can understand. Jargon is used to create barriers — to immediately recognize who is part of the "in" group. While it's useful if you understand what those who are trying to impress you mean when they say larva rather than the more scientifically precise caterpillar; or refer to the topside of a butterfly as its dorsal side; or refer to what every five-year-old recognizes as a tongue as a proboscis, a word that few pronounce correctly (elephants are part of the Proboscidea, why don't these folks use this ugly word there?); I urge you to use standard English words when you speak to others. Perhaps you won't impress them with how much better you are, but maybe you'll communicate with them about the importance of butterflies and the need to conserve them.



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