In contrast, until the early 1700s, apparently there were no widely used English names for individual butterfly species. James Petiver gave English names to many of the English butterflies in the early 1700s, but few of his names are currently in use. Later naturalists coined the names now in use.

When a culture does not have a name for something, it doesn’t really exist, and certainly isn’t important. Knowledge of local plants is critical for survival, many plants are used for food and medicine, while some plants are toxic. Thus, early on, there were English names for a large variety of plants and, as we have seen, English speakers paid attention to birds as well, again because many of them were eaten, but probably also because of their conspicuousness. But butterflies? Judging from the historical lack of widely used names for most different kinds of butterflies, they didn’t really exist!

When English, and then American, naturalists coined English names for butterflies, they didn’t coin *sui generis* group names, such as wren or swallow, although they easily could have done so (think speep for skipper). Rather they created names that incorporate the meaning of an already existing word into the butterfly group name, e.g., swallowtail (1741; having a tail similar to a swallow), orangetip (1747; having an orange wingtip) or skipper (1766; referring to the flight pattern).

Although some bird group names are of this form, e.g., bluebird and hummingbird, look down a list of butterflies and you will see that essentially all the group names fit this pattern. Even the word “fritillary” which dates to 1699, probably derives from a much older plant name. (To be continued)