Name that Butterfly: Part 2

Last issue, I presented some ideas related to the English names of butterflies and to a comparison of butterfly names with bird names. Two points were that a much higher proportion of butterfly “English” names are based directly on the scientific name (32% for butterflies compared to 9% for birds) and that a high percentage of English names for birds arose from general public usage while, for the general public, butterflies as individual species did not really exist and almost all English names of butterflies were bestowed by entomologists.

When earlier lepidopterists created English names for butterflies, they generally used either: 1. the scientific name as the “English” name, e.g. Cladius Parnassian (Parnassius cladius); 2. an English word that has a fanciful or imagined connection to the butterfly, e.g. Monarch; or 3. a name that related to a feature of the butterfly.

Although the most important point of a “name” is allowing groups of people a common understanding (which is why one of the very first projects that NABA undertook was the creation of an official Checklist & English Names of North American Butterflies), names can also help us to recognize and differentiate species. The names Orange-barred Sulphur and Large Orange Sulphur help at least some people to more easily remember and differentiate these species.

Butterfly descriptive names can relate to many aspects of a species — to its foodplant (Pipevine Swallowtail), habitat (Bog Egret), geographic range (Cuban Peacock), flight period (Spring White), how widely the butterfly is encountered (Common Buckeye), color (Gray Hairstreak), pattern (tiger swallowtail), wing shape (Tailed Copper), body part shape (American Snout), size (Giant White) — or to the butterfly’s effect on humans (Confused Clouded Yellow).

Many fewer butterflies have descriptive names than do birds, partly because of the high proportion of butterfly “English” names based upon the scientific name, but also because closely related butterfly species tend to run “closer” than do closely related bird species. For example, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, and Black-throated Green Warbler are all closely related, but easily separable by general color pattern, while many closely related butterflies, for example, Great Basin Fritillary, Zerene Fritillary and Coronis Fritillary do not have consistent, easily describable differences in color and/or pattern. So, it is difficult to coin names that help describe or differentiate them in the field from similar species.

Another factor allowing more descriptive names for birds, is that color, pattern and shape differences can be noted for many different parts of the birds’ body. Ruby-crowned, Red-eyed, Short-tailed, Blue-winged, Yellow-rumped, Yellow-legged, Black-necked — these are just a very few of the myriad terms that can functionally be used to describe birds. With the great majority of butterflies, almost all of the color and pattern action is on the wings. And, unfortunately, there are really no existing English words that adequately describe most portions of a butterly’s wings. Even the widely known words forewing and hindwing haven’t been used for naming.

Until recently, the only wing portion regularly used for names, was the wing border or edge, as in Pink-edged Sulphur; Lilac-bordered Copper, Silver-bordered Fritillary and Red-bordered Satyr. In 1993, the NABA Name Committee created English names using features of the forewing costal margin and the forewing discal cell — coining the names Costa-spotted Mimic-White, Band-celled Sister and Spot-celled Sister. I have followed the use of the costa and cell features in finding names for some Mexican species, e.g. green-celled cattleheart (Parides childrenae), and, given the large number of species of Mexico, I have expanded the use of different wing parts to include the leading edge of the FW and the trailing edge of the HW to create names, e.g., red-lead fiestamark (Symmachia probitor) and yellow-trailed swallowtail (Battus lyceus).

As more people become interested in the butterflies of the Neotropics, with roughly 7500 species, we need names not only for individual species but also more group names. (To be continued)

The North American Butterfly Association (NABA)

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