



Monarch of a Vast Domain

Taxonomists Just Wanna Have Fun

by Harry Zirlin

I have written

before about the derivation of the Monarch's scientific name: *Danaus plexippus* ("A Royal Family" *American Butterflies*, Winter 2004 pg. 44). Here, I am going to concentrate on its English name, Monarch, and other names that it has been called through the years.

The name Monarch was apparently coined by Samuel H. Scudder in 1874. In an article entitled "English Names of Butterflies" in the journal of the Cambridge Entomological Society (*Psyche* volume 1: pg.10), Scudder says

"*Danaus Plexippus* — The Monarch. D'Urban calls it the Storm Fritillary, but it is not a Fritillary. Gosse called it the Archippus, but this is not its proper name. It is one of the largest of our butterflies, and rules a vast domain."

In a later work of Scudder's, the 1889 "Butterflies of the Eastern United States and Canada," he treated Monarch under one of its many old scientific names, *Anosia plexippus* and listed in brackets a series of English names as follows: "[The Monarch (Scudder); The Archippus (Gosse); The Archippus

butterfly (Harris); The Storm Fritillary (D'Urban); Web-Footed Danay (Emmons); Queen of Spain Butterfly (Ross); Milkweed butterfly (Burgess); Bermuda Butterfly (Jones); The Storm King (Moffat); The Storm Butterfly (Grote).]" From this it may be inferred that Scudder himself believed that his publication of the name "Monarch" was a first.

Note that at one time Monarchs were known as *Anosia archippus* which accounts for the names attributed to Gosse and Harris. Of more interest to me are the names Storm Fritillary, Storm Butterfly and Storm King. Those names were apparently used by English authors because the few times that inhabitants of the British Isles came across our Monarchs were after storms that blew them to England from who knows where. As for the name "Storm Fritillary," the English call lots of butterflies that are not true fritillaries "fritillaries" including the Duke of Burgundy Fritillary (which is a metalmark) but the Gulf Fritillary is not a true fritillary either, so it is hard to point fingers (well, not that hard).

"Bermuda Butterfly" is an odd name for a species as widespread as Monarch, although it certainly occurs on Bermuda. But again, we call Compton Tortoiseshell after a town in Canada despite its almost continent-wide distribution, just as the English call Mourning

Cloak the "Camberwell Beauty" because it was first noticed by English naturalists in that spot. First names stick, and the people who first populated this continent got stuck with the name "Indians" despite the fact that it was very quickly apparent that Columbus missed reaching India by more than a country mile.

"Web-Footed Danay" must be a reference to the reduced forelegs that all brushfooted butterflies have and Danay is probably just a shortened form of *Danaus*. (The genus name *Danaus* was authored by Kluk in 1780 so has priority over Hübner's name *Anosia* which he coined in 1816). Why the appellation "Queen of Spain" was bestowed upon our Monarch is a puzzler, especially since there is a Queen of Spain Fritillary, *Issoria lathonia*, that now only rarely makes it to Great Britain. Even fairly recent publications offer "Milkweed Butterfly" as an alternate name for Monarchs including E.B. Ford's classic for the New Naturalists series "Butterflies" (1945). In that book, Ford also lists Black-veined Brown Butterfly as another name for Monarch which is also strange given that Monarchs are orange. Perhaps they look brown in the perpetual gloom of the British Isles [apparently, Mitt Romney isn't the only one who can rankle the British — Ed.].

Finally, I have also read that the name

"Monarch" may be derived from the family colors of King William (or Willem) II of Orange and, indeed, that in Canada the Monarch was (or is) known as "King Billy" for this reason. I know many Canadians interested in butterflies and have never heard any of them refer to Monarchs as "King Billy" or anything other than Monarchs, for that matter. But perhaps they call them Monarchs for my sake and, when they are among themselves, call them "King Billy" or maybe "King Billy" is truly a common name, used by people without a focused interest in butterflies, in the same way that some people refer to Northern Cardinals as "redbirds."

"King Billy," by the way, was Dutch but invaded England in 1688 and deposed King James II and became King of England, Scotland and Ireland. In fact, it was the people of Ireland and Scotland who dubbed Willem "King Billy." The notion of naming a butterfly after the family colors of an historical figure is not complete nonsense, I suppose, if we consider that Baltimore Checkerspot and Baltimore Orioles are named for bearing the colors of Lord Baltimore aka Cecilius Calvert (1605-1675). But whatever the origin of the name Monarch, it is hard to think of them going by any other name anywhere in their domain. 