



The Evening Grosbeak has no nocturnal tendencies. So, what's up with the name?
Photo by Greg Smith

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What's in a Name

I think many other boomers could relate when I admit, it never occurred to me in my youth that the word ‘gypsy’ was a racially-insensitive term (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rom>). A young person learns words from their usage by peripheral adults and friends, and perhaps TV shows and movies, then uses them, too. If you are familiar with the Gypsy Moth, you may have heard that its name has been officially changed by the Entomological Society of America to the Spongy Moth. Apparently, a shift in cultural attitude is sufficient reason to change an organism’s heretofore commonly known name.

Naturally, in my line of work over decades I’ve uttered the common names of myriad Michigan-occurring species repeatedly, even copiously. It stands to reason that in order to disseminate information regarding a species’ identification, behavior, habitat, range, ecology, etc., you must have an agreed name by which to call it.

Field guides provide these names, most of the origins of which date back far before any of us were born. For quite a list of reasons, I experience a mild degree of frustration over names of various wild organisms that were originally assigned long ago but are still in use today - despite their shortcomings. My beef has mostly to do with congruity... or the lack thereof. A disconnect between the bestowed name and the actual organism can be so obvious that it prompts a question. In educational venues I am often called upon to address the incongruity.

Since common names are coined for human purpose to begin with, why not follow a loose protocol for all whereby the common name assigned to, say, a bird, frog, snake, turtle, rodent or butterfly, calls attention to a discernable physical characteristic, habitat association, vocalization or other stand-out behavior? A name in keeping with its taxonomic group is also preferable so as to minimize confusion. This way, simply writing or saying the common name of the species affords the user – whether scientist, amateur naturalist, educator or student – an automatic opening nudge toward familiarity with the subject. It also works to sidestep misconception or confusion that may inherently arise from common names that don’t follow this

protocol. While many already fit these suggested criteria (i.e., Chipping Sparrow, Blue Racer, Meadow Vole, Spring Peeper, Tiger Swallowtail) those that don't also abound. In fact, pertaining to Michigan species alone, compiling a list of common names that I would characterize as "less-than-useful" could take several pages.



The Virginia Ctenucha Moth, with a range well beyond that state, has a name that is easily mispronounced, meaningless to most, and difficult to remember. Why not just Iridescent Grass Moth?

Some aspect of physical appearance is utilized in the bulk of common names. The more prominent the visible characteristic highlighted in the name, the better. Colors pop up frequently, i.e., Blue-spotted Salamander, Gray Squirrel, Red-winged Blackbird, etc. If the color stated in the name is prominent, why not go with it? But, of course, judging whether some physical traits are prominent enough to warrant acknowledgement in the name is quite a subjective endeavor. There is plenty of room for debate.

For instance, the Red-headed Woodpecker sports a completely red head. Meanwhile, the male Red-bellied Woodpecker wears a broad red racing stripe that extends from its forehead to its nape - definitely the most prominent aspect of its mien. "Red-headed" would accurately describe this one as well, but the actual Red-headed Woodpecker justifiably won out.

Settling for 'Red-bellied' as an alternate name, however, is short-of-satisfying to most birders. The subtle red wash on the male's belly is not a useful field mark because it is generally not easy to see on the bird. I often have been asked why it is called 'Red-bellied' by people who have never noticed it on individuals they've seen. I'd definitely be up for changing the name, although I have a hard time deciding what an appropriate alternative would be.

Other common names based on physical characteristics are so far off-base that one might have an easier time gathering a consensus for change. The Red-eared Slider's ear is not red. This common turtle exhibits a relatively broad red/orange stripe directly behind each eye with thinner yellow lines above and below it. Just as on a frog, there are no auditory openings on a turtle's head. A round, somewhat flattened patch of skin over the hearing organ called the *tympanum* is located *beneath* the red band and, in fact, a couple of the thinner yellow lines run through it. Science is a discipline that relies on observational accuracy. That's *not* the turtle's ear. Change it.

The mere name of the Common Snapping Turtle seems to elicit uncomfortable, and therefore, unhealthy perspectives toward it. A portion of the Michigan Reptiles and Amphibians exhibit that we set up and staff at various events features a pool with up to seven native species swimming freely at the feet of walk-by audiences. I point out and identify the various species for them.

Upon mention of the snapping turtle I brace myself for the nearly inevitable comments that follow, no less from adults: "Whoa, watch out for that one," or "That one is mean." We are thus prompted to explain that a wild turtle of nearly *any* species may attempt to bite to defend itself; from our experience a snapping turtle is no more likely to bite than



Nature Discovery's gentle snapping turtle patiently awaits a handout.

any other species; and that a snapping turtle which is not frightened in the presence of people, like ours, is one of the gentlest and *least* likely to bite when handled. We lift the turtle out of the pool to let them see for themselves.

When a species is first “discovered,” whether by scientist or layperson, it is given a name relatively quickly. Therefore, little may yet have been known about its behavior and ecology. Further study of the species might then eventually reveal a contradiction to the initially-given name. Certainly one of the more gross examples involves the surmised origin of the name, “milksnake.”



It's a mouser, not a milker.

Michigan’s Eastern Milksnake is an accomplished mouser. In rural settings throughout much of the state milksnakes occur where mice abound, like in barns.

I try to imagine a plausible scenario... A farmer of yore finds an engorged spotty snake, belly-distended, which at the moment of discovery happened to lay coiled in the straw directly below Bessie’s dangling udders. The farmer comes to the (obvious?) conclusion that the snake must have reached up, latched on, and suckled its fill. He then relays the incident to neighbors, and refers to the offending serpent as that “milk snake.” As the word spreads, it morphs in a manner not unlike you would find in a game of *Telephone*.

Some of this country’s early naturalists may, too, have named newly-“discovered” creatures based on assumptions made after quite limited observation. This appears to be the case in naming the Evening Grosbeak.

The Rose-breasted Grosbeak was aptly-named for a physical characteristic. The Pine Grosbeak, a bird of the northern coniferous forests, also named acceptably. However, the first couple of recorded sightings of this grosbeak that looked like an overgrown goldfinch happened to occur in the dusky hours of the day. The observers surmised that the species had nocturnal tendencies. Despite ensuing observations of Evening Grosbeak activity throughout all daylight hours, the originally coined name persists today (<https://www.audubon.org/news/ask-kenn-how-did-evening-grosbeak-get-its-misleading-name>).

The above nomenclatural shortcomings pale in comparison to this final anthropocentric propensity: to saddle a unique, ecologically-functional wild organism with a human being’s name. Leaf through virtually any field guide. I guarantee it won’t take long to find a species labeled with a human surname, often that of a naturalist from a distant century, as an honorific to that person - Wilson’s Snipe, Stellar’s Sea Lion, Compton’s Tortoiseshell, Fowler’s Toad, Butler’s Gartersnake, etc. There are hundreds of others.

I often present or teach about the Michigan-native Blanding’s Turtle. This species, a declining denizen of shallow, well-vegetated wetlands, is easy to identify chiefly because of its lemon-yellow chin and throat. No other North American turtle shares this field mark. I show a live specimen to kids. Minutes, days or months later the students remember the turtle with the yellow chin, but are usually unable to recall the assigned common name. To learn it requires more iteration than would



Our Blanding's Turtle shows off its bright yellow chin and throat.



Why should this gull belong to Bonaparte?

be required if the name matched the standout field mark - say, Yellow-chinned or Yellow-throated Turtle. Information learned could be shared more readily with others to the turtle's benefit if its common name could be easily remembered.

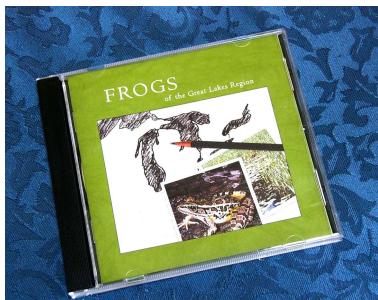
What attitude do we convey when we designate a human surname possessive to a species, by which everyone is then expected to refer to it? The action may be meant to honor the discoverer *ad infinitum*, but in the process it steals something from the organism. An honorific common name subverts objective recognition of the subject. It also infers a manifest human dominion over the organism that is *so* 18th century.

Continuance of the practice is an affront to the pursuit of discriminate scientific understanding as we accept it today. Wherever possible, now more than ever, we should realign our perspective to see ourselves as a conscious *piece of* the planet's intricate biodiversity rather than *lords over* it.

Incidentally, Capital Area Audubon Society's November newsletter included an excerpt from an article in National Audubon's Summer 2022 magazine entitled, *What's in a Bird's Name?* I made it a point to not read the article until after I had written this column so as not to be influenced by its content. Peruse this interesting read, and you'll note a number of points and examples in common, but the *Audubon* article delves into honorifics and cultural attitude shifts, such as in regard to slave-ownership, much more deeply: <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/summer-2022/whats-bird-name>

Elementary, middle school and high school science and biology instructors could effectively incorporate the study of nomenclatural accuracy into grade-appropriate lessons and exercises. Individually or within a group students could select various animal species, determine individually or within group discussion whether their given names are acceptable, then suggest alternate, improved common names based on physical, behavioral or ecological traits and associations that they research. It is a worthwhile discipline to help a student objectively think about and appreciate natural diversity in focused detail.

- Jim McGrath



Give a natural gift this season “FROGS OF THE GREAT LAKES REGION”

Instructional and environmental listening featuring our own original recordings of the breeding calls of 13 native species compiled from wetland habitats across the state. Load the app onto a phone or tablet! \$15. Check our website for details.

NATURE DISCOVERY GIFT CERTIFICATES

A guided experience for adults, couples, or families at our nature center located north of Williamston. Base rate is \$30/hr. Upon payment we will email you a certificate to print and present to the recipient.

Gift certificates are also available for a holiday Wild Life Day Camp date (reserve your own – more details on Page 6), outdoor guided functions for adults and families, i.e., interpretive walks or birding outings at local natural areas, an “owling” night, etc. Contact us for details or to discuss more ideas.





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Holiday Wild Life Day Camps

December 20 thru January 5

There is so much to do here that camp days just fly by! A combination of indoor and outdoor activities include lots of time interacting with scads of specimens of nearly 40 species of small and large Michigan-native reptiles and amphibians housed here, including turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards. Participants never grow tired of handling our huge Black Ratsnakes. Our two tortoises, Milberta the Red-footed Tortoise and Fyodor the Russian Tortoise love to eat, and will munch lettuce in slow motion right from the campers' hands. Busy bird feeders outside the window offer up close looks and identification opportunities of a variety of winter songbirds. Trails through six acres of natural area allow for plenty of guided exploration and fun activities in the fresh winter air.

In response to area school districts with differently aligned holiday breaks... On Tuesday thru Thursday over three weeks we will offer day camp opportunities for children K thru middle school. With advance notice, a parent is welcome to attend at no extra cost.



December 27-28-29, 9am to 3pm: General Enrollment Day Camps

\$80/child/day. Contact us by email or phone to enroll in advance and secure a spot. Roster limit: 8.

December 20-21-22, January 3-4-5, 9am to 3pm: Reserve a Day for Your Own Pod
Contact us by email or phone to secure a day with advance payment. \$360/4 participants. Ask us about payment adjustments for more or less participants.

Advance Payment Options

Personal check made to Nature Discovery.

Payment via Paypal/CC thru the donation button on our website. Please add 3% to the payment amount to cover the transaction fee.



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*Visit Our
Nature Center
by Appointment
Over the Holidays*

*Suggested Minimum
Donation: \$5/person/hr*



The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor or outdoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique, in-person, hands-on experiences here are unrivaled at any other nature center or zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.



This Bull Frog is more excited than it looks to snatch a worm out of your fingers.

Handle any or all of Michigan’s three species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms and tadpoles. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about arranging weekly or monthly visits or regarding custom natural science lessons to supplement your student’s interests and grade-specific science requirements.

Contact us for additional information or to make an appointment any day.



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***By Appointment
Over the Holidays...
Go “Owling”
at Nature Discovery***



Schedule a 90 minute appointment for your small group (recommended max. 6) to visit **almost any evening after dusk**, and we'll attempt to draw a *wild owl* in for a close-encounter!

The evening begins with Powerpoint images and recordings to help you become familiar with Screech, Great-horned and Barred Owls - the three permanent residents found in Lower Michigan. Learn about six other species - migrants from Canada - that drift southward into our area to hunt for prey over the winter, including where to go to see them.



Then, we will go out the back door into the darkness to try to get one to respond to recordings. If an owl comes close we will attempt to spotlight it for viewing. Bring binoculars and a camera if you have them.

Before or after the owling experience visitors may also wish to view and interact with specimens from our huge zoo of Michigan-native reptiles & amphibians.

Base suggested donation: \$100.

Do you live in a rural area? Arrangements can also be made to have this program come to you whereby you may get a chance to meet your own neighborhood owl face to face. Contact us for details or to make an appointment, here or there.

Note: The likelihood of attracting an owl is diminished in windy or precipitating conditions. If possible, arrange to schedule a visit after confirming a favorable weather forecast. If you schedule a date further in advance, feel free to cancel and reschedule on short notice if the forecast calls for poor conditions.

*During this holiday season
we wish to extend a heartfelt
‘Thank you’ to all our
supporters, including these
donors for their contributions
over the past month...*

Anonymous

Sandy Carey

Jan Heminger

Gregg & Tiller Landick

Sandy Mobley

Montessori Childrens House

Nancy & Jack Nelson

Okemos Nursery School

Barbara Paff & Richard Moe

Chris Paige

Stanfield Family

Stepping Stones Montessori



Vigilance, Action Give Cause for Environmental Hope

It is easy to become disheartened into hopelessness over the deteriorating state of the planet by our own hand, however, as the year draws to a close there appears to finally be reason for hope.

Some Good Climate News: The Biggest Wins in Clean Energy in 2022

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/08122022/inside-clean-energy-2022-good-news/>

Expectations Run High as an Exuberant Lula Speaks at Climate Summit

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/16/climate/lula-brazil-rainforest-climate.html?smtyp=cur&action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styln-cop27&variant=show®ion=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc%E2%88%A3=tw-nytimes

As surely as the sun will shine, though, corporate waste and greed will continue to work against the common good if we keep a blind eye. Vigilance cannot abate.

Dumpster Diving to Shame Stores and Fight Waste

https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/21/style/dumpster-divers-shame-stores-tiktok.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20221122&instance_id=78249&nl=the-morning®i_id=97652655&segment_id=113907&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

Why American Aluminum Plants Emit Far More Climate Pollution than Some of Their Counterparts Abroad

https://insideclimatenews.org/news/06122022/why-american-aluminum-plants-emit-far-more-climate-pollution-than-some-of-their-counterparts-abroad/?campaign_id=54&emc=edit_clim_20221209&instance_id=79771&nl=climate-forward®i_id=97652655&segment_id=115540&te=1&user_id=e2b8dd8c9b543fb8c35d5dd30658067e

Want to Help Reduce PFC Emissions? Recycle Those Cans

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/06122022/want-to-help-reduce-pfc-emissions-recycle-those-cans/>

In the coming year please join us in keeping the ball rolling - through conscientious choices and actions that value a sustainable world. -JM

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” -Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg

Scientific findings should never be distorted or influenced by political considerations.

-from President Biden’s Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking.



Less Beef = Less CO₂
Cowspiracy.com



Worldwarzero.com



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**Union of
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Science for a healthy planet and safer world

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