

## SQUEAKY CURTAIN

Frank Jacobs

[Ed. note: This article is based on “Squeaky Curtain Divides Europe’s Mice in East and West,” by Frank Jacobs, in a “Strange Maps” article dated 27 November 2019. (<https://bigthink.com/strange-maps/squeaky-curtain?rebellitem=2#rebellitem2>)]

If you’re a mouse, Europe is still divided in two, along a divide strangely reminiscent of the Iron Curtain. The house mouse diverged into two subspecies depending on which humans they followed. The Western and Eastern European house mice can interbreed, but the results are, well, mixed. The continent remains divided between Eastern and Western mice except for a narrow contact zone where hybrids eek out a living

It has been thirty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the Iron Curtain is now a distant and dimming memory. But that is only true if you are a human. In the mouse world, Europe is still divided in East and West. As this map shows, the line that separates both halves of the continent is strangely similar to the Cold War frontier between capitalism and communism.

The Squeaky Curtain starts at the Baltic Sea, cutting through Denmark, Germany and Austria before almost making it to the Adriatic. Instead, the line shadows the formerly Yugoslav coast before swerving east, keeping the southern Balkans in “the West,” finally diving into the Black Sea.

West of the line lives the Western European House Mouse (*Mus musculus* ssp. *domesticus*). To the East, roams the Eastern European House Mouse (*Mus musculus* ssp. *musculus*). On average, the eastern mouse is smaller and browner, the western one generally a bit sturdier and usually grey. Both subspecies branched from the same ancestor, some 500,000 years ago in Asia.



Image: Macholán, M., Baird, S.J., Munclinger, P. et al. Genetic conflict outweighs heterogametic incompatibility in the mouse hybrid zone?. BMC Evol Biol 8, 271 (2008) doi:10.1186/1471-2148-8-271



*M. m. ssp. domesticus*

Faroe Islands, 2013, Sc#606

What ultimately separated house mice into these two subspecies are the humans they chose to follow. The ones moving through Asia’s interior via Russia towards Eastern Europe turned into Eastern European House Mice. The ones aiming for the Mediterranean, hitchhiking on ships to reach Western Europe (and eventually also the Americas and Australia) became Western European House Mice.

When the two subspecies met up again in Europe, is unclear. “It has been suggested that source populations first met in the southern region of the current hybrid zone, and only more recently in central and northern Europe, with progressive contact from south to north similar to a zipper being pulled up through Europe,” write the authors of *Genetic conflict outweighs heterogametic incompatibility in the mouse hybrid zone?*, a scientific paper that examines interbreeding between Western and Eastern European House Mice (and the origin of this map).

“Progressive contact” is not necessarily a euphemism for doing the dance with two tails. The long genetic separation means the subspecies have drifted far apart. While males of either subspecies generally do not care whom they mate with, females prefer the company of males of the same subspecies. That limits interbreeding. And hybrid couples usually produce fewer offspring than “pure” Eastern

or Western ones. Both factors help explain why interbreeding only occurs in a relatively narrow and stable hybrid zone no more than 10 to 20 km wide.

The reduced capacity for interbreeding may be an indication that the two subspecies are in the process of becoming two separate species, entirely unable to interbreed. Only at the centre of the hybrid zone do hybrid mice occur in significant numbers relative to their Eastern and Western forebears. But not everything is gloomy for the hybrids: they are more resistant to parasite-borne diseases than both Eastern and Western European House Mice.

## WEDDING SET

The latest in a series of sets designed to accommodate wedding correspondence is planned for release on 2 April 2020, by the U.S. Postal Service. The **Contemporary Boutonniere** is a Forever rate (55c) stamp similar in design to the new two-ounce Garden Corsage stamp. Mailers can use it for wedding RSVP cards. It is also perfect for party invitations, thank-you notes, announcements, birthday cards, and other occasions when a beautiful stamp is fitting. The stamp features a photograph of an arrangement of a burgundy mini-cymbidium orchid bloom, a succulent, and a touch of green hydrangea, accented with loops of variegated lily grass.

The **Garden Corsage** is a new two-ounce rate (70c) stamp. This stamp can accommodate the weight of heavy invitations for birthdays, weddings, anniversaries and other celebrations, oversize greeting cards for all occasions, and mailings such as small gifts that require extra postage. The stamp features a photograph of a corsage containing a spray of peach roses and a pink ranunculus, accented with deep-pink heather and seeded eucalyptus. A cream-colored lace ribbon entwines the flowers. The Garden Corsage is similar in design to the Contemporary Boutonniere Forever stamp, and the two form a natural pair.



Set	Issue Dates	Denom.	Cat. No.
Love Roses	July/August 1988	25c & 45c	Sc#2378-79
Love Globe & Parrots	9 May 1991	29c & 52c	Sc#2535-36
Love Bouquets	14 February 1994	29c & 52c	Sc#2814-15
Love Cherubs	12 May 1995	32c & 55c	Sc#2957-60
Love Swans	4 February 1997	32c & 55c	Sc#3123-24
Love Flower Hearts	28 January 1999	33c & 55c	Sc#3274-75
Love Letter Roses	14 February 2001 19 November 2001	34c & 55c 57c	Sc#3497-98 Sc#3551
Love Contemporary Art	16 August 2002	37c & 60c	Sc#3657-58
Wedding Doves	1 March 2006	39c & 63c	Sc#3998-99
Wedding Hearts	27 June 2007	41c & 58c	Sc#4151-52
Wedding Hearts	10 June 2008	42c & 59c	Sc#4271-72
Wedding Rings & Cake	1 May 2009	44c & 61c	Sc#4397-98
Wedding Roses & Cake	April 2011	(44c) & 64c	Sc#4520-21
Wedding Cake	20 January 2012	65c	Sc#4602
Wedding Cake	18 January 2013	66c	Sc#4735
Wedding Flowers	11 April 2013	(46c) & 66c	Sc#4764-65
Wedding Cake	22 February 2014	70c	Sc#4867
Wedding Cake	1 June 2015	(71c)	Sc#5000
Boutonniere & Corsage	2 May 2017	(49c) & (70c)	Sc#5199-5200

The modern designs of the boutonniere and corsage both were arranged by floral designer Carol Caggiano and photographed by Renée Comet. Art director Ethel Kessler designed the stamps.

These sets of two designed for wedding invitations and replies started with the 25c and 45c Love Roses set issued on 4 July and 8 August 1988 (Sc#2378-79). The table at left contains information about the other sets with this purpose.