

WHY THE LATIN NAME IS USED ON ANIMAL STAMPS

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I am currently revising philatelic checklists for invertebrates and reptiles and am listing both the common name and the scientific name on all animal stamps in my checklists. In this process I use existing lists, presumably prepared by members of the Biology Unit. Most of these authors are enthusiastic stamp collectors, but are professionals other than biological scientists and are unfamiliar with scientific names. For example, in a checklist of mollusks I find other animal species such as corals, crustaceans, fish and sea stars in these checklists that should not be there because the author does not know the meaning of scientific name. I find spelling errors made by the designers or engravers of the stamps faithfully reproduced in these lists. When only the scientific name is found on a stamp there is no attempt made to find the common English name. In most cases I think common names are more understandable and more readily accepted by members of the Biology Unit than Latin names

In this article my objective is to describe the basics of common and scientific names for those ambitious souls who wish to contribute to our knowledge of animals and plants on postage stamps through philatelic checklists and biological articles. These avid collectors contribute an immense body of knowledge to the Biology Unit.

The primary reason why Latin names appear on animal and plant stamps is that it is an international language used by scientists throughout the world to communicate with and understand what scientists in other countries are doing.



How to recognize a scientific name on an animal stamp. Most scientific names for a species are written as two words. The first name is the genus in which the first letter is capitalized e. g. *Xestia* while the second name (specific name) is always written in lower case (*dolosa*). Both names should be italicized in printed publications or underlined in typewritten material. Both the generic name and the specific name of an animal usually end in an *a*, *i*, *urn*, or *us*.

Many grammatical errors are made by stamp engravers or designers, mostly in developing countries. For example, XESTIA DOLO SA, Xestia Dolosa or Xestia doloza may be inscribed on a stamp instead of *Xestia dolosa*. Misspelling of the scientific name is most prevalent in the gastropods (sea shells) where so many amateurs are involved but who are totally ignorant of the International Rules of Zoological Nomenclature governing the naming of species. This Icelandic stamp shows the scientific name at the upper left and the other writing is in Iceland's Nordic language.

Rarely, on stamps, there is a third word in a scientific name to denote a subspecies. A subspecies is usually a population differing in external appearance from another subspecies and occupying a separate geographical area. Both subspecies are variations in a single species.

An even better way to recognize a scientific name is to use the Internet Explorer facility on your computer. For example, you may want to know if "Caiman yacare" is a scientific name. So, enter "Caiman yacare" in the search box provided by the Internet on your monitor then press "Enter". Your screen will inform you that you now have access to ten index pages and 6,340 articles on Caiman yacare. Usually the first page will contain the

basic information on both common and scientific names. In the fourth literature summary, the Animal Diversity web page reads "Classification, Species *Caiman yacare* (Yacare Caiman)". This tells you that "*Caiman yacare*" is a Latin name since it is italicized and the common name "Yacare Caiman" since it is not italicized. You have opened the door to a world of information about the classification, geographical distribution, morphology, physiology and other biological information about the Yacare Caiman.

Meanings of scientific names. Usually the scientific name describes a species in Latin. For example, the scientific name of the Two-spotted Spider Mite formerly was *Tetranychus bimaculatus*; *Tetranychus* means "web-forming mite" and *bimaculatus* means "two-spots" in Latin. Likewise, the European Green Lizard was named *Lacerta viridis*; *viridis* meaning green in Latin. Sometimes species are named for the place where they were first found; Nile Crocodile, *Crocodylus niloticus* or American Alligator, *Alligator mississippiensis*. Some are named after their behavior, such as the *Boa constrictor*. In other cases, an animal may be named after a person for example, *smithii*, or *browni*. In this case the engraver nearly always makes it *Smithii* or *Browni*, which is wrong. Although scientists use the name of the describer after the genus and species this is seldom the case on stamps. The animal name on some stamps may bear a transposition of the wording such as, Lamarck lamellose wentletrap which should be Lamellose Wentletrap (Lamarck first described this species) but the describer is only used after the scientific name, not the common name. Carolus Linnaeus was one of the great scientific figures of the 18th century and described a great number of species. His name has been abbreviated to L. and Linne and sometimes this nomenclature appears on stamps.



Scientific names are not permanent for some species. Scientific names may change when a scientist in a library search finds a name for a species that predates the current scientific name. If this event is published in the scientific literature then the current name is superceded by this discovery and is relegated to the list of synonyms. Synonyms are lists of scientific names for one species that have been superceded, one after another. In our example above, the Two-spotted Spider Mite, was originally described by Linnaeus as *Tetranychus telarius* in the 18th century. Later the scientific name was changed to *Tetranychus bimaculatus* by Harvey but is now known as *Tetranychus urticae* Koch. These changes occur when generic revisions are made and when priority dates are discovered.

Another example of how scientific names are recognized internationally occurred in 1968 when I decided to attend the 13th International Congress of Entomology in Moscow, Russia. An International Congress is a meeting held every four years at various places throughout the world to present papers on specific subjects and to exchange information on research and education. At the Congress I presented a paper on the Oriental Fruit Moth, *Laspeyresia molesta*, since this pest had recently invaded Russia. On a postmeeting tour of Russia and Finland I visited the International Institute of Zoology at Leningrad. I was met by a technician who did not speak English. Fortunately there was a German scientist, speaking with the Russian curator, who overheard me talking about the Noctuidae (Owlet Moths) I wanted to examine. He then told the technician that I wanted to see the noctuids. A smile of understanding rippled over her face and she motioned for me to follow her to another section of the building. There I said "I want to see specimens of *Lithophane*, *Orthosia* and *Amphipyra*". She then proceeded to layout the museum drawers containing the genera that I requested and opened a large volume by Seitz "Macrolepidoptera of the World" which illustrated the Family Noctuidae. Even though she spoke no English and I spoke no Russian we could understand each other through scientific names.

Family names. Family names some times are found on stamps. These are easily recognized since they

end in "-idae", for example the cat family is Felidae which is not italicized.

Common names. Common names are also used to briefly describe a species, for example: Ring-necked Snake, African Hissing Sand Snake, and Black-necked Spitting Cobra.

Common names may be colloquial so that dragonflies may be called snake doctors in mid-western America but are referred to as Devil's darning needles in other parts of the country. On the international level this geographic problem with common names increases. In the United States, I have published behavioral papers on the Spotted Cutworm but in England I would be correct to say that I have published articles on the Setaceous Hebrew Character. In both cases, I would be writing about the same moth species, *Xestia dolosa* Franclemont.

Another name that sometimes appears on stamps is the common name in the language native to the country that issues the stamp. This is illustrated in the French stamp above which bears the inscription in French "Girafe reticulee" which means "Reticulated Giraffe" in English.

I hope that my explanations will be of value to those who are preparing biological checklists or articles in the philatelic literature.