The Main Thing The World Needs is Another Butterfly Book

John Acorn

I had fun in my last two columns, exploring the subject of insect names and how we apply them to species and subspecies. I was also happy to hear from those of you who found this interesting. I do realize, however, that for some people it comes across as a bit old-fashioned. Nonetheless, and at the risk of appearing even more old-fashioned, I'd like now to share some thoughts on another crucial and timely but potentially old-fashioned subject—insect books. (Yes, books are still a popular means of communication among people, and we now have enough data to falsify the prediction that they are being replaced by websites.)

First, though, I have a confession to make. Two issues back, while discussing subspecies, I stated that the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature ("The Code," as we say) had its beginnings in 1961. How silly of me—I had a niggling feeling at the time that this seemed far too recent, but I ignored it, as I sometimes do with niggling feelings, always regretfully. When the column appeared in print, a senior colleague gently reminded me that the history of The Code dates back far before then, in fact to 1901 (and subsequently tucked away in a book called "Procedure in Taxonomy"). But get this: I was fooled by the fact that the official website for The Code begins with a quote attributed to "G. Chester Bradley, Preface to the 1st edition of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature, 1961." Apparently the "first edition" is something distinct from the "first version." No wonder some people find taxonomists confusing. But hey, I am also clearly guilty of instant-answers-from-the-Web syndrome here.

Speaking of my senior colleagues, we have a wonderful tradition here in Edmonton in which many of the entomologists gather for lunch every Tuesday. The older fellows in the group have been doing this since 1958, the year I was born. I attend because these people are my friends, and also because we have such interesting conversations. A few weeks ago, the topic was books, and whether those great and magnificent monographs (the example at the time was Adler et al.'s treatment of the black flies of North America) encourage and stimulate further work, or have the opposite effect since people assume that a group has been "done" and no longer needs much attention. Partly because we had a few drinks before lunch, we came to no real conclusion on this topic, but it was clear that one could argue either side of the issue quite easily.

Part of my career has involved the writing of field guides. I have now co-authored two bird guides, as well as five introductory "bug" guides, two butterfly guides, and guides to the Alberta tiger beetles, damselflies, and lady beetles. So, when one of our Tuesday Club members asked the other day what I have been working on lately, and I replied "a butterfly field guide for Ontario and eastern Canada," it shouldn't have surprised me when he paused, and then said "John, the last thing the world needs is another butterfly book!"

I suppose he's right. After all, just about all the butterflies in Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime provinces have been adequately described and illustrated in books dating back to 1923 and Clarence Weed's "Canadian Butterflies Worth Knowing," W. J. Holland's 1931 "The Butterfly Book," and of course the classic Peterson Field Guide to eastern butterflies by Alexander B. Klots (the book I used during my childhood butterfly-collecting days). I especially like the title of Weed's book, don't you? The exact same book was published as "Butterflies Worth Knowing" in 1917, in the United States.

Of course, the butterflies themselves haven't changed over the last century, and even though many of their names have changed, anyone with access to the web can sort these things out quite easily. So yes, it's a legitimate question—what does the world want with yet another butterfly book? In my opinion, there are two answers: the scientific answer, and the social answer.

The scientific answer will make sense to most entomologists, and it basically amounts to this: we know more now than we did during the days of Weed, Holland, and Klots. We know more about distributions, host plant associations, phenology, abundance, and taxonomy of the adult and immature stages. We have also added a few introduced species to our fauna. So it's good to produce an updated summary of these things from time to time. But that's not much of an argument in the world of field guide publishing, since field guides are not intended to be exhaustive primary reference sources. In fact, that's one of the nice things about writing a field guide—you get to synthesize and simplify, hopefully without oversimplifying in the process.

That leaves the social answer, which can also be summarized easily: people want their books to *feel right*. And let's face it, old books (even for those like me, who love old books) *feel* old, and to some this amounts to old-fashioned and fusty, carrying with it the insidious threat that they might be out of date.

The people who use field guides are mainly amateurs (the professional market is

(continued on preceding page)

Terminal Segment continued from page 128

too small to justify the expense of publishing the books), and to most amateurs the feel and tone of a field guide are all important. This is especially true of butterfly guides. For one thing (as I discussed in my last column), butterfly names have been in a state of flux, more or less perpetually, since the beginning of scientific study of insects, and many people truly believe that there is such thing as "The Correct Name" for each sort of butterfly. These same people also seem to believe that the most recent book by the best-known author will surely contain these very names. They worry that they might use "old" names or "wrong" names in front of other butterfly people, so they don't mind forking out some cash every year or two to get a new field guide. Silly, isn't it?

Then there is the issue of tone, and part of "tone" is a matter of design. Old-fashioned field guides were designed the old-fashioned way, and this is easy to spot on the shelf in the bookstore. All of the plates are bound together in older books, since color printing was more expensive back then and the idea was to minimize the number of color pages. Likewise, all the maps were typically placed together in the back. It was the Golden field guide to North American birds (co-authored by Herbert Zim, who sold vastly more field guides than Roger Tory Peterson, I am told) that introduced the notion that the text for a species should appear on the same two-page spread as the illustration and the map.

As well, there are (as we all know) two kinds of people: those who prefer photographs for identification and those who prefer artwork. There are also two other kinds of people: those who take offense to specimen photographs in a field guide ("it's really a museum guide" they chant gleefully and with great scorn) and those who value the ease of comparison that comes with standard anatomical positions. Having held all four positions, at least temporarily, I can vouch for these dichotomies at a deep personal level.

As a result, in my own work I've tried all the styles. I've used photographs of living insects that were cooled in the fridge (for which some reviewers criticized me), then photos of living insects whose karma remained undisturbed (yes, the word karma is often used when cautioning nature photographers, believe it or not). I have done my own color drawings of beetles, and of damselflies. Lisa Reichert did superb pencil drawings for my first butterfly book, and most recently Ian Sheldon and I have collaborated on a number of books featuring his remarkable mixed-media paintings of butterflies and other insects. My conclusion? They all work well, but some impress the reader more than others and the best approach is probably a mix of photographs and high-quality artwork.

The text of a field guide also possesses tone, and part of that tone, when it comes to butterfly books, has to do with whether the author supports or condemns collecting, and whether the book positions itself as a tool for conservationists, or as a resource for recreational naturalists. I personally prefer a recreational focus, and I endorse both collecting and watching for butterfly amateurs (along with photography, rearing, and the like). By making these choices, one appeals to some parts of the "market" while failing to "feel right" to others.

Publishers compete to sell books, but not with regards to whose author is a greater authority on the subject. Instead (and this surprises many entomologists) the competition occurs between book designers and authors who cleverly position their works in the market. Publishers like to sell books, and everyone likes positive reviews, but before you come away thinking it's all about greed and corruption, remember that the overall goal is to support and encourage interest in the insects themselves, and in order to do that, one has to continually reposition the subject among the currents of a continually changing society. And that's not really an old-fashioned idea, now, is it?

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John Acorn lectures at the University of Alberta. He is an entomologist, broadcaster, and writer, and is the author of fifteen books, as well as the host of two television series.