

# Latin Fun: Moving Beyond Common Names

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL GAMBINO

**P**etrochelidon pyrrhonota – gesundheit! For a beginning birdwatcher struggling to identify a Cliff Swallow for the first time, memorizing that seemingly unpronounceable Latin name is hardly going to feel like a high priority. Scientific names might even seem like they were given to intimidate and confuse beginning naturalists, but of course there are some very good reasons for using them.

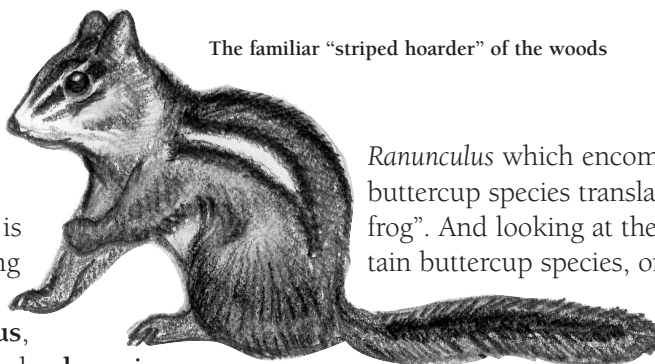
My own appreciation of the use of Latin names began after I returned to the United States from Finland, went on a mushroom walk, and realized I couldn't tell anybody what I'd seen because I had only learned the Finnish common names. So, my laziness did not pay off – I ended up learning everything over again, but this time making an effort to learn the Latin too. Scientific names were created for just such a reason: to allow naturalists the world over to be able to understand one another, to make standard the names of the world's flora and fauna. Even within the United States, there is enough regional variation in common names to warrant the existence of that common Latin denominator – for example, the regional common names chickaree, fairy diddle, and piney squirrel all refer to the Red Squirrel, *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*.

Still, learning the scientific names does take some effort. Although I've referred to "Latin names" a few times already, that is not completely accurate – they sometimes have their origins in Greek, Germanic, Native American, and other languages as well. Take *Helmitheros vermivora*, the Worm-eating Warbler, as an example. It has a Greek genus and Latin species name, translating to "the worm hunting, worm eater". Seems a bit redundant, but it gets worse!

*Troglodytes troglodytes* is not a typing error – it is the **genus**, **species**, and **subspecies** name for the Northern Wren, *Troglodytes* meaning "one who lives in a hole" (some wrens are cavity nesters). Nevertheless, after learning a handful of scientific names, the Latin and Greek start to stick and patterns start to develop. Common words like *maculata* (spotted), *rufum* (brownish), *odon* (tooth), and *dendrata* (tree) become recognizable in the scientific names of animals and plants.

And learning the meanings of the names is hardly an exercise in dry memorization. Although all the *bergii*, *cooperii*, *swainsonii*, *virginianus*, and *carolinensis* named after people and places are rather dull, occasionally you'll come across one with a sense of humor, such as a marsh rabbit, *Sylvilagus palustris hefneri*, named after that famous magazine publisher. Others have a playful or poetic meaning equalling or exceeding that of the common name, for example, the genus

The familiar "striped hoarder" of the woods



*Ranunculus* which encompasses the buttercup species translates to "little frog". And looking at the leaves of certain buttercup species, one can see the resemblance.

Another example, and the inspiration for this article, is 'the watching butcher', the Northern Shrike, *Lanius excubitor*, famed for catching its prey and impaling it on thorns or fence spikes. Here are some more:

**Dark Puffball** (*Lycoperdon foetidum* = 'stinky wolf fart') – an unpleasant smelling mushroom that releases spores in a visible cloud when pressed

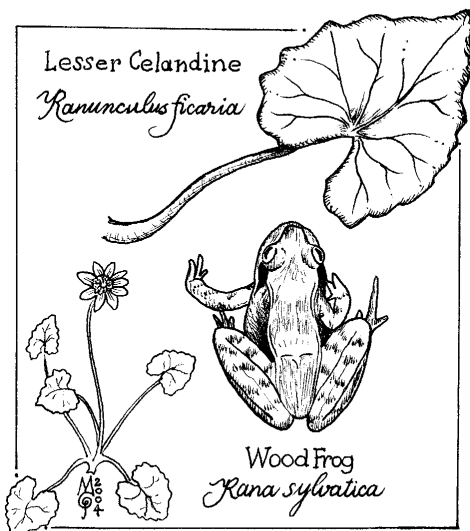
**House Swift** (*Apus affinis* = 'the neighbor without feet') – a reference to this bird's small, weak legs and habit of building nests near human habitats. It was a common, but incorrect belief that once a House Swift has landed on the ground it cannot take flight again because its legs cannot give it enough support. Swifts belong to the *Apodidae* family, also translating to "no feet".

**Black Vulture** (*Coragyps atratus* = 'raven-vulture clothed in black') – Black Vultures belong to the *Cathartidae* family, 'the cleansers or purifiers', a reference to their scavenging activities.

**Impudent Stinkhorn** (*Phallus impudicus* = uh, I'm not going there) – a fungus with an awful odor and distinctive shape.

**Brown Thrasher** (*Toxostoma rufum* = 'reddish bow-mouth') – a reference to the bird's color and its distinctive beak shape.

**Eastern Hog-nosed Snake** (*Heterodon platirhinos* – 'unusual toothed, wide nose') – a reference to the ungrooved fangs and shovel-like nose.



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## Latin Fun *(Continued)*

Those names and their meanings are pretty fun! Now I've collected a few more listed below if you'd like to challenge yourself.

### Guess the Animal Quiz:

Below are the scientific names and their translations for well-known North American animals. Can you guess the animals from the clues? (**Answers at bottom of page**)

1. ***Sciurus carolinensis***, 'Carolina shade-tail'.  
*Hint:* This animal is common throughout most of the U.S., not just in the Carolinas. It gets its name from its habit of sitting with its tail over its head.
2. ***Tamias striatus***, 'Striped hoarder'. *Hint:* This animal stores extra food in a chamber below ground.
3. ***Glaucomys volans***, 'Silvery flying mouse'.  
*Hint:* It is not a bat.
4. ***Molothrus ater***, 'Dark, greedy beggar'. *Hint:* This bird lays its eggs in the nests of other species and when the young hatch they outcompete their "siblings" in begging for food from their adoptive parents.
5. ***Erethizon dorsatum***, 'I have a back that irritates'.  
*Hint:* Not a good animal to pet. ❖

5. *Erethizon dorsatum* = Canadian Porcupine

4. *Molothrus ater* = Brown-headed Cowbird

3. *Glaucomys volans* = American Flying Squirrel

2. *Tamias striatus* = Eastern Chipmunk

1. *Sciurus carolinensis* = Gray Squirrel

**"Guess the Animal" Quiz:**

**Answers to**