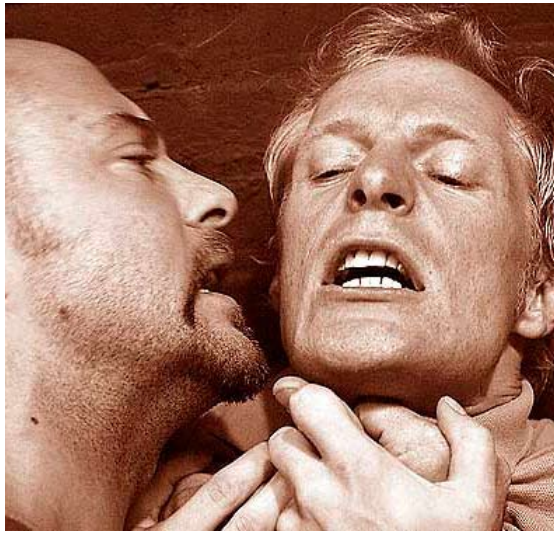


Taxonomists Just Wanna Have Fun:

When GOOD TAXONOMISTS GO BAD

by Harry Zirlin

(Butterflies Behaving Badly)



Above: A scheming Malicious Skipper. April 29, 2001. Catemaco, Veracruz, Mexico.

In the spring of 2005, two taxonomists who study an obscure group of beetles made a splash in the popular media when they named three newly described slime-mold beetles after President Bush, Vice President Cheney and then Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. Although the two taxonomists insisted that they intended it as an honor for these men to have their names attached for posterity to three species of slime-feeding beetles in the genus *Agathidium* (*A. bushi*; *A. cheneyi*; and *A. rumsfeldi*) there was nevertheless some snickering in the press.

I bring up this incident (Slime-Moldgate?) because anyone trying to ascertain how or why certain butterflies got their scientific names must always remember that the person describing a new species can name it pretty much anything he or she wants to name it, provided that the name is not pre-occupied by

another species in the same genus. I have in my hand a well-worn copy of “A Field Guide to the Butterflies” by Alexander B. Klots which was first published in 1951, although the copy in hand is from the fifth printing of February 1960. I’ve had this copy since I was ten or so (I was ten in 1963 if you are wondering). On page 271, Dr. Klots says of Malicious Skipper, *Synapte malitiosa* “I do not know what flight of fancy caused the specific name of this little skipper.” Dr. Klots then went on with his account of Malicious Skipper, leaving the reader as much in the dark as he was regarding the name chosen for this otherwise unassuming species.

So why would someone (the someone being Dr. Herrich-Schaeffer back in 1865 in this case) dub a somewhat drab little skipper “malitiosa” meaning “malicious?” Well, some butterflies are pugnacious, if not downright



A Fatal Metalmark spreads its wings, seeking to ensnare naive victims into its sulfurous web. Dec. 6, 2004. NABA Butterfly Park, Hidalgo Co., TX.

malicious. Male American Coppers, Common Buckeyes, Banded Hairstreaks and the males of many other species often chase, and even appear to engage in battles with, other males of their own species. They also routinely chase other species of butterflies as well as other insects much larger than themselves. I have seen Common Buckeyes dart after Green Darner dragonflies in what could have turned out to be suicide missions, but never with a fatal outcome.

This behavior of chasing after other flying objects is often referred to as “territoriality” because the males of these species appear to stake out a territory and then pursue anything that flies within it. By doing so, they may find that the erstwhile unidentified flying object pursued is a female of their own species looking to start a family with a vigorous male who managed to find and hold a territory long

enough for her to fly by. By mating with him, she may be ensuring that those “territory-holding” genes will be passed on to her offspring. This could be a case of evolution in action or it could be a case of me assuming I understand a phenomena that is far more complex than it appears. But I bet it is not a case of butterflies acting “maliciously” if Dr. Herrich-Schaeffer had this behavior in mind when he bestowed the name “Malicious” on our little *Synapte*.

Malicious Skipper is not our only butterfly with a devilish name. If I was ranking the top ten bad boy/bad girl butterflies and Malicious Skipper was number one, next on the list would be Fatal Metalmark *Calephelis nemesi*, named thus by W.H. Edwards in 1871. Nemesis, in Greek mythology, was the spirit of divine retribution, personified as a vengeful goddess who struck down those who