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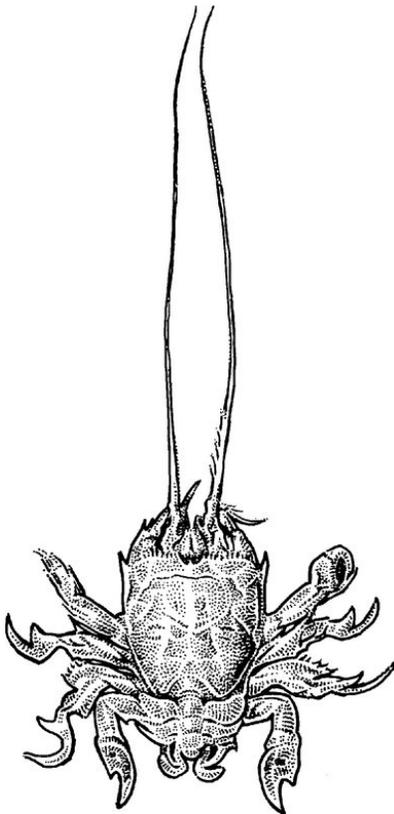
Is That Buzz a Beyoncé Fly or a Lady Gaga Wasp?

Bored scientists attach famous monikers to new species; a Beyoncéfly.

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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/is-that-buzz-a-beyonce-fly-or-a-lady-gaga-wasp-1461599941>



When University of Wyoming entomologist Scott R. Shaw discovered a brand-new species of wasp, the find came with one of the juicier [plums in the scientific world: naming rights](#). He dubbed it *Aleiodes shakirae*—for the “Hips Don’t Lie” singer Shakira.

Dr. Shaw said the wasp lays its eggs inside a host caterpillar, which causes the host to squirm and bend.

“That reminded me of belly-dancing, hence the name,” said Dr. Shaw, who has christened other wasps for David Letterman, Ellen DeGeneres, Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, Jimmy Fallon and the poet Robert Frost.

It isn’t easy to come up with [new scientific names](#). About two million of Earth’s animal and plant species have monikers, leaving up to 28 million without. And there is one absolute rule in the [International Code of Zoological Nomenclature](#) for naming new animals. The combination of genus and species—the first and second words in the scientific name—must be unique.

“You really have to use your imagination,” said Terry Erwin, curator of coleoptera—that is, beetles—at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C.

Naming species after celebrities offers scientists a ready supply of names, and maybe the possibility of a brush with greatness.

In the past five years, an aquatic mite has been named for Jennifer Lopez; several wasps for the hobbits in “The Lord of the Rings”; a crayfish for National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden ; a fish for Barack Obama ; and a genus of ferns, a wasp and a prehistoric mammal for Lady Gaga.

Scientists thought a fly named for Beyoncé Knowles looked slightly “bootylicious,” and an extinct hippopotamus named for Mick Jagger had sensuous lips.

Dr. Erwin has named beetles for actors Catherine Bell, Kate Winslet, Liv Tyler and Arnold Schwarzenegger (but not John, Paul, George or Ringo).

Celebrity names have increased with the rise of social media, which makes it easy to share with a famous person’s fans, said Michael Engel, an editor and reviewer for the scholarly journal ZooKeys and senior curator of the University of Kansas’ Biodiversity Institute and Natural History Museum.

Many say the names are simply a way to express creativity in the sometimes thankless task of classifying organisms. Scientists give names to about 15,000 animal species a year, whether they are discovered in the wild or in a museum drawer.

“What we do is really boring,” said Neal Evenhuis, senior entomologist at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Hawaii. “It’s a break from that.”

Dr. Evenhuis recalled his discovery of an extinct fly stuck in amber, which he named for the actress Carmen Electra.

“Elektron is the Greek word for amber,” he said. “I thought, maybe I’ll get a picture with her. The museum’s PR people contacted her people but, well, she missed out on that opportunity.”

Lifelong comics fan Christopher Boyko said, “I torture myself over names.” The associate professor at Dowling College in Oakdale, N.Y., tries to create a pleasing-to-the-ear combination of Latin description and homage to his favorite characters and cartoonists. The simplest way to Latinize a celebrity name is to add a suffix of “i” for a male or “ae” for a female.

The crab specialist has named various invertebrates for Yoda, Lord Voldemort, “Peanuts” creator Charles M. Schulz and “The Simpsons” creator Matt Groening.

Many scientists said they try to emphasize the importance of biodiversity and scientific progress while they hope for a meeting with the stars. But “sometimes, you just want to suck up to the celebrity and see if they notice,” Dr. Boyko said.

Spokespeople for Shakira and other stars declined to comment.

The practice has raised concern among some taxonomists, the scientists who identify and name new species. Some say the popularity of celebrities and public figures may be fleeting—or worse. Once a new species is described in a scholarly paper and passes the peer-review process, its name won’t change unless it is reclassified in a new genus. Names stick around basically forever.

As a cautionary tale, taxonomists point to the Hitler beetle, *Anophthalmus hitleri*. A German scientist named the rare bug in 1933. Nazi memorabilia collectors have since brought the beetle to the brink of extinction.

“The only reason people care about this blind cave beetle is that it’s named after Hitler,” said Douglas Yanega, an entomologist at the University of California Riverside and a commissioner of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature.

Others say the fashion contributes to a crass commercialization of scientific nomenclature. A few cash-strapped taxonomists or institutions even sell naming rights to the highest bidder. In a widely cited instance, the Wildlife Conservation Society auctioned off the right to name a Bolivian monkey. An online casino, GoldenPalace.com, reportedly outbid Ellen DeGeneres and paid \$650,000 to name the monkey *Callicebus aureipalatii*. The second word is Latin for “golden palace.”

“Naming something after a celebrity is one thing, but selling a name is a different matter entirely,” Dr. Yanega said.

The biggest problem with celebrity nomenclature, said Dr. Engel, the journal editor, is that it doesn’t seem to contribute to scientific progress.

“The reality is, if someone is telling you, ‘I’m naming this species after Seinfeld because I’m trying to improve biodiversity discovery,’ where’s the evidence that it achieves the goal?” he said. “I know of no such evidence.” Scientific names have traditionally described a species’ physical characteristics, location or other biological information.

A few researchers manage to get a nod from their idols.

Dr. Boyko, the crustacean expert, said he met Mr. Groening by chance at a comic convention in Brooklyn. The cartoonist drew him a personalized sketch of Bart Simpson to thank him for the crab.

The beetle specialist, Dr. Erwin, got within a few degrees of separation from Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was then the governor of California. Dr. Erwin’s staff sent him a picture of his six-legged namesake, and the governor responded with an autographed photo.

Auburn University arachnologist Jason E. Bond, who has named spiders for Johnny Cash, Neil Young, Bono, Penn Jillette, Angelina Jolie, Stephen Colbert and Barack Obama, hasn’t been so lucky.

“I would have loved to have heard from Neil Young—or Angelina Jolie!” Dr. Bond said. “This certainly hasn’t proven to be a way to meet celebrities.”