



Common Name Selection in the Internet Age: A Crazy Case Study

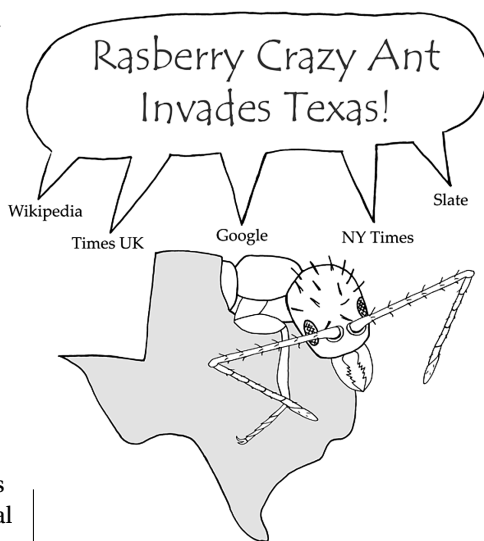
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As increasing numbers of previously obscure species enter the public eye, how do we choose what common name to give them? In the past, common names used by the public had well-known etymologies dating back decades or centuries. Recently, common names have been created *de novo* for field guides or other public ventures (often under the liberal influence of alcohol, or so the stories go).

However, we have now entered the Internet Age, and the World Wide Web offers added challenges and opportunities for those who wish to designate official common names. Below is a case study of *Nylanderia fulva* (Mayr) (Hymenoptera: Formicidae), which has recently been given the common name “tawny crazy ant” by the Entomological Society of America (ESA 2013), but was previously known as the “Raspberry crazy ant.”

Nylanderia fulva was first definitively identified in the United States by Gotzek et al. (2012). That premiere publication provides a common name and etymology: “Despite widespread attention, this invasive species has not been clearly identified. Lacking a proper species name, it [*N. fulva*] became known as the Raspberry Crazy Ant (RCA) for its discoverer, exterminator Tom Rasberry” (Gotzek et al. 2012).

Presumably, a common name is meant to facilitate acquisition and dissemination of accurate and precise information. Common names accomplish this task by being more palatable to the public—easier to say and remember. In the case of *N. fulva*, the reason given for the necessity of a new common name (“tawny crazy



ant”) was twofold, the previous name was “uninformative” and, the authors stated, “It is imperative to designate an official common name for *N. fulva* to curtail any additional confusion caused by the continued use of the aforementioned unofficial common names associated with this species or with *N. pubens*” (Oi and Gotzek 2012).

In anticipation of the future creation of a new common name for *N. fulva*, an informal comparison of the names “Raspberry crazy ant” and “tawny crazy ant” was performed on 13 February 2013.

Raspberry Crazy Ant

Googling the words “Raspberry crazy ant” (without quotes) yielded 57,700 results. The same search using only “ant” yielded 275 million results, an indication that “Raspberry crazy ant” was a specific search term that would yield specific results. In a search for “raspberry crazy ant,” Google

recognized the mistake and first offered search results for “Raspberry crazy ant.”

All of the results of “Raspberry crazy ant” on the first search-results page, including the photographs, referred to the species *N. fulva*. The first result was Texas A&M’s Urban Entomology page on *N. fulva* (<http://urbanentomology.tamu.edu/ants/raspberry.html>). As of this writing, the common name used on the Texas A&M page has been changed from “Raspberry Crazy Ant” to “Tawny (Raspberry) Crazy Ant.” The second result was Wikipedia’s page on *N. fulva* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crazy_Raspberry_ant). Nearly all the results on the second page also specifically referred to *N. fulva*, while other results referred to “crazy ants” in general.

Similarly, searching Wikipedia for either “Raspberry Crazy Ant” or “*Nylanderia fulva*” (without quotes) resulted in redirection to the same page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crazy_Raspberry_ant. As of 13 February 2013, that page had been visited 7,056 times during the previous 90 days. That’s about 80 visits a day, or more than 29,000 visits a year.

Tawny Crazy Ant

The same Google search using the term “tawny crazy ant” (without quotes) yielded 4.79 million results. Neither the Texas A&M site nor the Wikipedia site were recovered on the first two search pages. The first search result was a news article from 2012 about crazy ants moving to Florida (<http://tinyurl.com/ka4xq66>). The article was not specific to *N. fulva*, but only covered “crazy ants” in general. Two of the photos displayed were of accurately

identified specimens of *Nylanderia pubens* (Forel). Six search result pages were only found because they contained a comment that “tawny crazy ant” may be a possible new common name for Raspberry crazy ant, not because they contained high-quality content on *N. fulva*. One news article specifically about “Raspberry crazy ants” was recovered in the search because it contained a question from a reader at the bottom: “Can anyone confirm that tawny crazy ants are the same as the raspberry [sic] crazy ants that have benn [sic] plaguing lower Texas for the past couple of years?” (<http://tinyurl.com/kke7353>)

Searching for “tawny crazy ant” (without quotes) in Wikipedia yielded this result: “The page ‘tawny crazy ant’ does not exist.”

Discussion

The argument could be made that as of February 2013, the common name used by scientists and the public alike to learn about, search for, and talk about *N. fulva* was Raspberry crazy ant. At that time, “tawny crazy ant” only existed as an unnecessary addition or point of confusion.

Ideally, when a common name already exists, has been consistently used for a particular species, and is (actually) commonly

used in society, it should be retained. These “wild” common names can be searched for, and their consistency is available for hypothesis-testing in the great commons of the Internet. When a common name or consistent use of a common name truly is lacking, “domesticated” common names can be bred and released, but when a new common name is invented, care must be taken to make sure it really is needed and isn’t a weedy obstruction that promulgates obfuscation.

As the information landscape changes, we also have to change how we evaluate common names. In a few special cases, such as the one highlighted here, the public will have already done our work for us, creating a common name and working to use it consistently. In other cases, *de novo* common names will be appropriate.

If the Entomological Society of America’s Common Names (ESA 2013) are to be useful, meaningful, and (most importantly) actually used, they must take into account current common usage. The Internet is quick to learn and changes and updates have already been made to some sites, but the Internet is also slow to forget: *Nylanderia fulva* now has one common name and one Common Name. Certainly, there

will be some confusion during the transition period while the common names become synonymized, and updated proposal guidelines should take into account current Internet usage to avoid common name synonymies. Future proposers of common names can learn from the crazy case of the crazy ants.

References Cited

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