
QUARTZ

BEYONCÉ THE HORSE FLY

Hello, I'm Johnny Cash the tarantula: Why new species are named after celebrities

Samantha Drake | June 23, 2016





 The male. In black. (Wikimedia)

When scientists recently discovered a new species of black tarantula living near Folsom State Prison in Folsom, Calif., the name they chose made complete sense: *Aphonopelma johnnycashi*. *Aphonopelma* is a genus of tarantulas native to the US and *johnnycashi* honors iconic country singer Johnny Cash, the “Man in Black” whose 1968 concert at the prison included his song “Folsom Prison Blues.”

“It fit perfectly,” explains Dr. Chris Hamilton, a postdoctoral researcher at the Florida Museum of Natural History at the University of Florida in Gainesville. “I’m a huge Johnny Cash fan so the fact that the name fit perfectly was fun and exciting,” he says.

The name also drew a flurry of media attention when it was announced earlier this year.

A. johnnycashi is far from the first or last species named after someone famous. Many researchers embrace celebrity names as a way to draw attention to their work and perhaps much-needed funding. But if it seems a little strange to name organisms after pop-culture references, some scientists would agree. There’s an undercurrent of unease with the practice in the scientific community among those who prefer less whimsical naming conventions. But the sheer number of new species discovered each year means scientists sometimes have to dig deep to come up with appropriate names. The question of what’s appropriate and whether it matters remains up for debate.

Celebrity spotlight

The scientific names of organisms are governed by five separate sets of rules for animals, plants, bacteria, domesticated plants, and viruses. Under the system known as binomial nomenclature, organisms are given two-part, Latinized names representing their genus and species.

According to the International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature ([ICZN](#)), which oversees animal names, every name of a new species must follow the two-name format, and be published in an outlet that’s available to others, usually a scientific journal. There are apparently no rules about what kind of names can’t be used. The ICZN specifically states that it “does not police the use of zoological nomenclature” but will weigh in on a dispute if asked.

With little regulatory restraint, creative, fanciful and just plain odd species names have proliferated since 18th century Swedish natural scientist Carl Linnaeus developed the taxonomy, or classification system, for species. Mark Isaak, the owner of the [Curious Taxonomy website](#), has catalogued approximately 3,600 entries of organisms named after people, places, things, mythology, fictional characters, interjections, puns and other wordplay as well as a section of names based on what Isaak calls “ribaldry.”

As an aside, if it seems like a lot of newly discovered bugs are named after celebrities, like the horse fly named after Beyoncé (*Scaptia beyonceae*), the wasp named for Shakira (*Aleiodes shakirae*), or the trapdoor spider named for Angelina Jolie (*Aptostichus angelinajolieae*), there’s actually a reason behind it. Arthropods—including insects, arachnids, myriapods, and crustaceans—account for most of the diversity on Earth, explains Hamilton. In other words, most new species discoveries tend to be bugs, spiders, centipedes, and crabs.

Celebrity-inspired names actually make up a tiny fraction of all species names. About 18,000 new species are discovered each year, says Dr. Quentin Wheeler, president of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF). The problem is, the Earth is losing 20,000 species a year, which is an unprecedented rate, he adds.

“I’m for anything that brings attention to this biodiversity crisis,” says Wheeler, a beetle expert who named three slime mold beetle species after George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. (Wheeler maintains it was a compliment.) He also issues, with the help of an international committee of scientists, an annual Top 10 Species list of press-friendly discoveries made in the past year on May 23, Linnaeus’ birthday.

Simply put, naming a new species after a celebrity is an easy way to draw attention. For example, the discovery of a new wasp in 2012 would have gone unremarked if it hadn’t been named after Lady Gaga. Within 24 hours of being released, the announcement about the Lady Gaga wasp was cited 30,000 times by news outlets around the world, Wheeler notes. Further, the *Aleiodes gaga*, which got its name from distinctive molecular data that happens to spell out the acronym G-A-G-A, not only drew attention from its connection to the pop star, but also spotlighted the new barcoding technique used to describe a large cohort of new species more quickly, Wheeler points out.

Mixed feelings

Some researchers are ambivalent about seeking publicity.

“I can see the point of celebrity names but it bemuses me as much as it amuses me,” says Dr. Ellinor Michel, chair of the International Committee on [Bionomenclature](#), which explores ways to harmonize the

various rules governing scientific names of organisms. She previously served as the Executive Secretary for the ICZN and is on Wheeler's Top 10 Species committee. "I feel sort of mixed," Michel says. "Anything that gets the public more excited is generally a good thing. Generally."

Bestowing a fun, personally meaningful name on a little-known organism can be a little bonus after slogging through the description and naming of 70 species. Michel says she's been tempted to name something after her dog, but has resisted so far.

Many new species are discovered every year but most are organisms no one is aware of or cares about, Michel acknowledges. But fanciful names can trivialize the work, she adds. Michel tries to make a name relevant to its look and where it was found, or to honor someone. The genus and species names of the *Vinundu westae*, a freshwater snail she discovered in Central Africa, for example, comes from the Swahili word for "many bumps" and the name of a respected colleague, she explains.

Michel also expresses concern over whether species named after celebrities will have relevance in the years to come. "The understanding of why something was named after Beyoncé is going to go away," she points out.

So at least for now, the positive aspects of celebrity-named species outweigh the negatives in the scientific community, even if some misgivings persist. "I wish we didn't have to do it," Michel says, but concludes "I think most people don't get too riled up about it."

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