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SPECIES DISCOVERIES: The name game delivers a pot of gold --- and protection

By [Mike Toner](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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*Genisphindus roxannae* may be just another bug to the average entomologist, but to Joe McHugh the newly discovered species of Peruvian slime mold beetle — and its name — speak of love.

"I named it after my wife Roxanne," explains the University of Georgia entomologist, who has notched 18 new species of beetles so far in his career.

"She put up with so much from me over the years, I wanted to honor her. This wasn't an exceptionally flashy or colorful beetle, but it was elegant and beautiful in its own way."

Since time immemorial, discoverers have exercised the privilege to name that which they have found — from rivers and mountains to planets and stars. Nowhere in the world of science, however, is the taxonomic name game more taxing than in biology.

Take beetles. By recent count, there are 365,000 species with names and scientific descriptions. But experts say the total number of beetle species is probably many times that.

With new ones being discovered every day, the task of naming them can strain the imagination of the best scientists.

Honoring family, pols ...

Faced with having to name 65 new beetle species, for instance, a team of Cornell University researchers, opted, as McHugh did, to name some after wives and family members.

Then they moved on to prominent politicians with *Agahtidium bushi*, *A. cheneyi*, and *A. rumsfeldi*. The researchers insisted the names had nothing to do with habits of the beetles or their appearance, but did christen one with a dark, shiny head *A. vaderi* for Star Wars villain Darth Vader.

Of course, with 15,000 new species discovered every year, rules are needed to prevent literary chaos.

Animal names, for instance must meet the approval of the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature, which requires three-part names — the Genus, with a capital G, the individual species in lower case and, as an appendage that is often dropped, the name of the person who first described it. Similar groups police plants and bacteria.

The name czars prefer pronounceable words, preferably Latinized, and they shun monikers that are offensive or might "disturb stability or universality or cause confusion."

When money speaks

Even with that sobering oversight, however, there is room for wit, whimsy — and even a little old fashioned enterprise. A German nonprofit group,

Patrons for Biology, [www.biopat.de](http://www.biopat.de), for instance, is listing new species that the discoverers have agreed to let public sponsors name, in return for a donation to be used for research or conservation — \$3,500 for some insects and \$13,000 for a new hummingbird.

So far, more than 100 people have donated \$450,000 for the chance to name a species. Some fund-raising efforts go even further.

When Robert Wallace of the Wildlife Conservation Society discovered a new species of titi monkey in Bolivia, he could have named it after himself. Instead, he decided to auction off that privilege to the highest bidder — and use the money to help protect the national park where the monkey was discovered.

The high bidder was an internet casino. [GoldenPalace.com](http://GoldenPalace.com), paid \$650,000 for the chance to have the small monkey with a golden crown and a white-tipped tail christened *Callicebus aureipalatii* — the second word being Latin for, you guessed it, golden palace. Was it worth it? Casino spokesman John Cavelli thinks so.

"Hundreds, even thousands of years from now, the [GoldenPalace.com](http://GoldenPalace.com) monkey will carry our name through the ages," he says. Naming this species has brought us scientific, as well as virtual immortality."

A degree of immortality shared, of course, with the 1.75 million or so other species that each have their own uniquely named twig of the tree of life.

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