

SOME ENTOMOLOGICAL JARGON EXPOSED

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, an eminent lepidopterist sidled up to me at an entomological meeting, confessed he had come across a beetle description and asked me in hushed tones “What colour, exactly, is ...”, he hesitated, “...testaceous?” He pronounced it carefully so that I, a supposed coleopterist, should know precisely what he was talking about.

At the time, I was astounded that he should need to question me on the matter, and quickly gave my sheepish answer. Afterwards I wondered what could have possibly caused this confusion. In my naivety, I had not grasped what to many was so obvious – each of the entomological disciplines has its own terminology, its own distinctive set of words and terms, its own obfuscating and elitist jargon.

Lepidopterists are guilty of a few minor transgressions into idiom. The quaint use of the word “imago” may not be a problem, but when I first stumbled across the plural “imagines”, imagine my confusion at what I thought was some surreal flight of transcendental fancy. And if I am still not absolutely sure where a tornus might be, at least I can look it up in most standard books on insects.

On the other hand, coleopterists have accumulated a wide vocabulary of strange and alien-sounding terms, not least in one of the most basic and important areas of description – colour. Faced with “testaceous”, my learned colleague had been stumped. Most 19th and 20th century beetle books rely almost entirely on such terms to describe colours, but sure enough, most standard entomological texts ignore these seemingly archaic words.

In looking through a few Coleoptera books and in particular the many articles on beetles in entomological journals, I quickly came to the conclusion that it is sometimes difficult for a new-comer to the subject to fully appreciate what are really very good descriptions of these insects. I did, however, find several of them mentioned in the glossary provided by Cooter *et al.* (1991) (derived in part from that in Fowler, 1887) and the “orismology, or explanation of terms” in Kirby & Spence (1826). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) also offers some definitions, but these are sometimes at odds with entomological use.

To dismiss the use of such terms as needlessly confusing would be to denigrate part of the varied and colourful language of description, better perhaps to give them a fresh airing and make them more widely known. With this in mind, I offer up the following short glossary gleaned from various sources.

Aeneous: brassy: from the Latin *aeneus* meaning “brazen” (OED), also perhaps a more metallic golden green (Cooter *et al.*).

Castaneous: ruddy-brown; the deep rich brown which makes sweet chestnuts (*Castanea*) so appetizing on the brazier and horse chestnuts (*hippocastanum*) so irresistible when found found lying beneath a conker tree.

Ferrugineous: reddish or pinkish; sometimes described as rust-red (Cooter *et al.*).

Fulvous: reddish yellow (*OED*) tawny or dirty orange (Kirby & Spence).

Fuscous: dull brown, tawny (Cooter *et al.*) or dusky (*OED*).

Piceous: dark brown; despite its origin in *pix*, the Latin word for pitch, actually a shade less black than pitchy (see below); with a tinge of red (Kirby & Spence), green or yellow (Cooter *et al.*).

Pitchy: very dark brown, almost black; the true colour of pitch or tar. For some unknown reason "pitch-black" has come to mean a blackness deeper than pitch really is.

Rufous: red; either brownish (*OED*) or pale (Kirby & Spence).

Sulphureous: pale yellow; the colour of sulphur (*OED*) as in the bright yellow bands of the hedge snails, *Cepaea*; or perhaps tinged with a shade of very pale green much like the Brimstone butterfly (Kirby & Spence).

Testaceous: dirty yellow, yellowish-brown, light reddish-yellow. Various dictionaries describe this as the colour of dull terracotta pottery, reflecting the etymology of the word from *testa*, the Latin for "tile". Some earlier entomological works (*e.g.* Kirby & Spence) use it thus.

References

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